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PHŒBE'S FORTUNES

A. Walton



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PHŒBE'S FORTUNES

BY MRS. ROBERT O'REILLY

THREE VOLUMES,—II.



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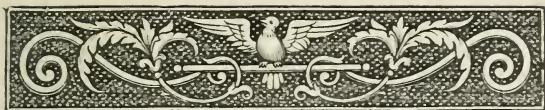
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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. TEA AND TALK	1
II. PHŒBE'S FRIENDS AT LAST	30
III. AT THE TOP OF THE TREE	63
IV. A FAMILIAR TOUCH	94
V. A SUMMER EVENING	133
VI. ON TRAMP	164
VII. AVICE	196
VIII. THE LITTLE STRAW HAT	224



I.—TEA AND TALK.

RHÆBE was at no loss to understand the enjoyment of her young cousins at the gardener's cottage; she was happy there herself. Not that she was ever *unhappy* anywhere for long, but if she had a fancy it was for simple pleasures; and, unconsciously perhaps, she felt more at home, more like her own true natural self, more in the atmosphere to which she had been accustomed all her life, in the house of old Gideon Fagge, than she had done anywhere else since her father died.

It may seem strange that such should be the case; but, however strange, it was true that a certain slight sense, of which indeed she hardly was aware, and which she could not have accounted for,—a certain sense of constraint and self-watchfulness for fear of vexing others, dropped from her altogether when her uncle had left them, and she had no other companions for the time being than Tim, Avice, and old Gideon.

Alone with the children she always *was* more blithely content than when with anyone else as well, but even they puzzled her at times. She was constantly doing or saying something that elicited from Avice a surprised stare, and the words,—Phœbe was beginning to dread hearing them, so weary of them had she become, and so impossible was it to make any suitable rejoinder to

them,—“*Mamma* never told me so!” or “*Mamma* never does that.”

As for Tim, though he was now chivalrously devoted to her, and would not knowingly have vexed her for the world, it *did* vex her very much to see how low a standard—which yet was the standard he had been trained to by those responsible for his training—he measured things by, and how utterly he disbelieved in the good of any higher one. He shirked his tasks, vexed his father by his idleness in school, was restless sometimes, and looked worried, as though his troubles were too much for him, and would not listen to Phœbe, when she told him to be good if he cared to be happy.

“Tell that to Avice!” he had said once indignantly.

“I can put it in any form you like, even in one wise and learned enough for a grammar-school boy,” she said, “and

in the end it will come to the same thing—the absolute identity of happiness and goodness, Tim. What is there, what *can* there be, to trouble about if one's conscience is at peace ? ”

“ There's lessons to trouble about,” Tim had answered, with a despairing groan ; “ try as you will, Phœbe, you won't get religion into the Latin grammar, or a conscience at peace over mathematics.”

“ Oh, Tim ! You make me think of a sermon I heard long ago. In a little country church it was, standing in the rectory garden. Such smooth green turf, flowers up to the grey walls, tall trees standing near,—green then, Tim, as the trees are now, with the fresh living green of early summer. It was only a village sermon, fit for the village congregation ; but, oh, *how* fit, too, for you and me ! I never think of that beautiful and pleasant

country without seeming to hear it over again."

"What was it all about—the Latin grammar?"

"Yes," she began.

"Oh, come! I dare say," the boy flung himself about upon the sofa, in his father's study, where this little talk took place.

"Well, of course, I don't mean that literally, but it *was* about your work, and my work, be that what it may. The preacher spoke of the miraculous draught of fishes, and how the fishermen had toiled all night, not at any great thing new or difficult, or separate from their ordinary lives, but just at their common daily work, and how, looking up, they saw Jesus nigh,—not looking on only, Tim, not there to be worshipped even, but there to *help*. And so it is always. He stands near us, ready—ready to help in the daily duty, be it *what* it may. I

cannot repeat it well ; I see now it is the echo of the words only that has lingered with me all this time, but it *has* lingered with me ever since, and helped me often. Won't it help you, cousin ? ”

It was not often they had such talks as these, but the boy, as high-spirited, seemingly careless boys frequently do, pined for sympathy ; and when he came to her in boyish fashion, detailing boyish grievances, what *could* Phœbe do but try to lay in his hand the only clue she knew of to disentangle the threads of life—the clue that in her own life never yet had got twisted with baser threads, but shone through them bright and clear, a silver strand, as it were, straight from her heart to heaven.

Tim seemed to have forgotten his troubles this evening.

“ Why should we be idle ? ” Phœbe

said gaily, when she had rescued Avice from the watering-pot—the cress was past rescuing; “have you nothing we can do, Mr. Fagge? Is there no weeding for me, no bed to dig for Timothy, nothing but mischief for these busy little fingers of Avice’s?”

The old gardener smiled, well pleased, and set them to work at once. Avice was made supremely happy by being provided with a yellow bowl into which to pick green gooseberries; weeding was found for Phœbe herself, and radishes to pull and wash for tea, and they were all busy and amused; while within the cottage, Deborah set on the kettle, spread the whitest of cloths on the round table, and set out the cups. It might have excited the curiosity of her guests had they seen her do this last, for, standing at the open door of the small cupboard where she kept such things, and having taken

out the common blue delf cups in daily use, Deborah looked up above her head at the top shelf, and seemed to hesitate. Finally mounting on a chair, she took in her hand a smart pink china cup with a gold rim, which, with one or two other articles, stood upon that upper shelf. The cup was dusty,—everything was dusty on that shelf,—Deborah held it in her hand as though considering whether she would take it down and place it on the table, or leave it where it was. At last she shook her head, and muttered something to herself, and replacing the dusty cup where she had found it, took out another of the common sort and put it on the table with the rest. The little brown teapot was there already, and a tea-cake toasting before the fire; it was time to summon the guests to enjoy the feast prepared for them.

They were loath to obey the call, for, in foolish spirits now, and pleased with anything or nothing, they were very merry out in the garden, and Phœbe was a child with the children, while old Gideon's quaint dry speeches amused them all. Once she had been aware that as she passed him, the old man had taken a piece of her dress in his hand, and drawn a fold of it through his fingers. Seeing she had detected the action, he said simply,—

“It's a fine, soft sort of stuff. Happen now you always wear such as that? Yet yer ain't no finer, nor so fine, as my posies.”

“Indeed, I am not; and I don't call myself fine at all,” the girl said, laughing.

Gideon gave her a crimson rose, just coming into bloom, and she fastened it in front of her black dress. Avise must needs have one directly, and then Tim's

button-hole was adorned, and they went in to see what Deborah had for them.

The gardener would not come in himself. As they sat round the table sipping the strong sweet tea, and doing justice to the cake, they could see him still at work, covering his tender plants with the bell glasses that caught the low slanting beams of the evening sun, and shone and glittered under the hedge; watering the strawberries; undoing the mischief the children had done, Phœbe feared, as she saw him raking over the foot-marks in the beds; and shaking his head ruefully over the state of mud to which Avicé had reduced one border.

“I suppose he is a very good gardener, and has a great deal to do?” Phœbe said to Deborah.

“Not so much as he did have. He’s getting old now.”

“And you live with him to take care

of him. Has he no children of his own?" She glanced at the little straw hat behind the door—it could not be Deborah's, surely.

The woman laughed shortly. Phoebe thought she had an odd manner, as though the world had gone wrong with her, and she had a grudge against every one and everything in it.

"Oh, he've got children—leastways a son, but he's a wild one, and no good to nobody."

"Now I," Tim remarked, helping himself to radishes, "am a tame son. That is one advantage, among many, that my father has over Gideon."

"He is not good to him, do you mean?" Phoebe asked softly. "I am sorry for that."

"Good or bad, Gideon is not troubled with him now. He ran away years ago. The old man thinks he'll come back, but

he won't—not unless he wants something. If he do come, it'll be no help, only to eat us up."

"*Very* 'wild,' " quite a cannibal," Tim said, thoughtfully.

Phœbe went on with her inquiries.

"Had he a mother? did you bring him up?"

She was quick to take offence this woman, and she took it now.

"No one can say it was my bringing up that were to blame! The lad were a grown lad of fifteen before ever I had anything to say to him. I did bring up the girl, and *she*—well, she didn't turn out so badly, neither, as to have my bringing up of her throwed sudden in my face."

"I beg your pardon, I am sure you did well by your brother's children, quite sure, and I am so glad the girl turned out well. Is she here, in Calminster?"

“She’s dead,” said Deborah shortly.

Phœbe glanced again at the straw hat with its faded ribbon, and wondered whether it was a relic.

“And I suppose you and your brother have lived here always,” she began again, feeling in the mood for conversation herself, and knowing from experience that the poor like nothing better than to converse about themselves.

“We ain’t then,” answered Deborah. “Gideon, he had a good place on a farm some way off—miles off—as a young man; and his wife she were farm-servant there before he married her, and our folk all lived on that same land. But he’d such a turn for gardening, Gideon had, nothing wouldn’t content him but to turn gardener, and he ain’t done badly at it all in all. We didn’t move here not till after his wife’s death, and my folk was gone and scattered then, and he was

glad for to get me to move with him and mind the child—the girl I mean—the lad he were passed mindin' already."

"Gideon was Sir John Bartram's gardener, you know, at one time, but he wasn't up to all the dodges, and wouldn't take an under-place, so Sir John put him in here, and here he's been ever since," Tim said, as he appropriated the last piece of buttered cake.

"Why *should* he take an under-place?" asked Deborah, hotly, breaking off to replenish Avicé's cup, and "bless her little heart;" and then returning to her indignation: "he were older than any there, and knowed good ways with growing things, and how to raise 'em, before the other men knew any ways at all, and as for bedding-outs and that new-fangled nonsense, ribbon-borders, and the like—what's *them*?" with great contempt, and then, becoming civil and hospitable once

more, the woman pressed Phœbe to have more tea.

“I don’t admire ribbon-borders myself. I like sweet old-fashioned flowers the best——”

Phœbe’s conciliatory speech was interrupted by the old gardener, who stood in the open doorway.

“You be right. The old fashion is a good fashion. The sweet posies growing on their own roots, as the Almighty made ’em for to grow, and in the same places year by year, them’s better nor ribbon-borders, and such fantastic goings on. I don’t hold with new ways—never did.”

“Some new ways are good, though,” said Phœbe, “and the glorious new flowers remind one of the hand that made them as much as the simpler ones do.”


“There weren’t no ribbon-borders nor

bedding-outs in the Garden of Eden, I take it," said Gideon obstinately; "and there ain't none out in the woods and fields, where the Lord is the only gardener, and the posies grow as He bids 'em."

"And could they grow any other way in the gardens either?" Phoebe answered, smiling; "that is why I think yours such a beautiful trade, caring for the 'green things of the earth,' working *with* our Father, as one may surely say."

"We'd best all do that—leastwise not work *against* Him," Gideon replied, whereupon Deborah put in her word.

"*You* earn your living too, I take it, as a teacher now, don't you?" and Phoebe was struck by the different tone in which, a moment after, the woman turned to speak to little Avice. There was something familiar, Phoebe thought, in Deborah's manner towards herself, while to



Avice was shown the half flattery, half respect, generally observed by inferiors towards those they have been taught to consider their betters, mingled in this instance with the affection of an elder person for a little child.

It is because I *do* "earn my living," Phoebe thought, with an amused smile, as she replied to the question put to her, and was called upon to describe her pupils and the "gentlefolks" amongst whom she passed her mornings.

Deborah seemed wonderfully interested in anything Phoebe could tell of the canon's wife and daughter, or of the dean, and if Gideon was not interested also, he appeared not to dislike the subject, and though he put no questions himself, listened to all Phoebe told them.

"And I dare say now you see my lady some one time, by reason of Sir John being brother to Mr. Bartram, and don't

have to make a curtsey to her neither, but are free to speak up to her same as to me or Gideon here," Deborah said at last, with an odd ring in her voice, which Phœbe mistook for envy, though to the sharper ears of that shrewd observer, Master Timothy, it sounded more like triumph.

"No," Phœbe replied, laughing, "I do not curtsey to her exactly, but I assure you I am very respectful indeed, as becomes the daily governess of her little nieces. And Lady Bartram, by the way, is one of the nicest old ladies I ever met, and kind to me always."

"You've met many a lady too, and been as fine as they be, haven't you?" Deborah went on, staring at the girl and looking her over from head to foot, not with the veiled sort of glance usually considered courteous, but with a good, open, honest stare from both her sharp

grey eyes. "I won't say my lady isn't a civil body enough when one has to 'say to her,' but it's not often I done that, though she and Sir John between 'em have put a deal of work one way and another in Gideon's way."

"He put *our* work in his way," Tim remarked.

"He did," said Gideon, "when first I come to Calminster that was, and no one ain't had a hand in the garden in Grove Street since—I don't go for to meddle with your fine beds at Meadowthorn House."

"And this cottage is Sir John's, is it not?" Phoebe asked. I suppose you will never move from here again, now?"

"Not so long as Sir John lives, and that I take it will be longer than I live myself; but nothing's certain, least of all the time of death; and if Sir John's time was to come afore mine, why we might

be turned out in our old age, you see. There's them as wants to run up villas here already—villas!" the contempt he threw into the word was equal only to the contempt with which he spoke of ribbon-borders, or of bedding-outs.

"Oh, I hope you never will be turned out!" cried Phœbe, whose sympathy was ready for all demands that could be made upon it; "for where would you go? and it would be hard to go *anywhere* to begin again in your old age."

"It is all a matter of weather," said Gideon, in one of his quaint modes of speech. "You and I ain't no call to be afraid of cloud or sunshine; and if transplanting do be apt to kill old trees, there's one sort of transplanting as we all look to, and that's into a new soil as will suit old and young alike. I don't see no good looking for bad weather *before* the sky lowers. I plant my crop to gather it,

and not a-purpose to see it die, and always have ; if it *do* die, it's time enough to sow another then."

"Mad, quite mad; I told you so," Tim murmured.

"You are right," said Phœbe quickly, not to Timothy, but to her old new friend; "I know that changes cannot matter—yet change *is* sad."

She spoke so wistfully, almost as though she hoped he would own as much as that, and she felt no inclination to preach the pretty little sermons she, like other young things, was rather given to preaching, recognising that here it was her turn to listen and to learn.

The old man hardly answered to the purpose.

"I've one reason for wishing to bide here as long as it is the Lord's will," he said; "and I'll bide here, while I *can*—I can't do no more than that."

He was looking out through the open door, on to the front garden with the white gate and thick hawthorn hedge, but Phœbe thought that he saw nothing on which his eyes rested, but had followed in his fancy something far away, something that he yearned after, and that was dear to him. And so he had, but had followed it not in fancy only, but in one of the short heartfelt prayers that must surely, like a magician's wand, reach out and touch the head of those that are prayed for, that must surely be as a strong cord drawing wayward heartstrings towards home. Wasted they cannot be, we may be sure of that.

There being by this time nothing left to eat of Deborah's feast, and Avice having wandered away to play in the front garden, and Tim feeling refreshed and ready for exercise, the little party be thought them that it was getting late,

and they had a tolerably long walk before them.

“ Besides, if we start now, we shall be in time to pick up uncle in Grove Street, and join him for the rest of the way,” suggested Phœbe.

“ What will be the good of that? *I’m* in no hurry, a scolding will always keep,” grumbled Tim.

“ Scolding? ” said Phœbe, unpleasantly reminded of her uncle’s gloomy looks when she had parted from him last.

“ There always is one on hand, and more certain to be one than ever after we’ve had tea at Gideon’s.”

“ Then why *did* we come? ” she asked. The two were standing before the door out of earshot of either Deborah, who was noisily washing cups and plates, or of the old gardener, just then pulling down the boughs laden with the “ golden rain ” of the laburnum, to enrich Avicce

with their spoil. "Why does he *ever* let you come at all?"

She could not understand it, but remembered then how Gideon had warned her the evening she met him first, that "Mr. Edmund might have objections" to her paying the promised visit.

"You don't know! Phœbe, if you live in Calminster all your life you'll never be up to Calminster ways,—never, it isn't in you. And yet they call you quick-sighted!"

Quick-sighted for good, but very blind to mean and petty ways! Tim, if he had not been blind himself, might have found that out by now.

"What have Calminster ways to do with this matter? Don't stand chuckling there like the monkey you are, Tim, but explain," and Phœbe gave a little stamp with her foot, that edified Timothy amazingly.

“Don’t all Calminster try to please Sir John? wasn’t it Sir John who begged father to be kind to Gideon? isn’t Sir John one of our best customers in Grove Street? and isn’t there a fine new stationer’s in the High Street? doesn’t the old lady call and see my mother now and then when there’s an election, or some county business on hand, in which the townspeople can help or hinder as they choose? and doesn’t she—the old lady, I mean—ask after Gideon always, though it’s only because she hasn’t the ghost of an idea what to talk about? and would my mother offend her for the world? and hasn’t Deborah a tongue of her own, if Gideon *can* be silent? and don’t——”

Phœbe put up her hands over her ears.

“You bad boy! no more questions, if you please; and I do not believe you either; and if your mother does allow you

and Avice to come here, though she dislikes it herself, in order to please Lady Bartram, why, isn't it very kind of her, and of uncle, too? Only I think we will come here very seldom, though he *is* such a dear old man, and Deborah is a character, and I like studying characters," concluded Phœbe, who had indulged that taste, inherited from her father, all her days, and was quick to recognise originality when she met with it.

"We will go and join uncle, anyway," she said, tying her hat as she spoke, "for I should like to show him we are glad of his company, and proud of it, when we can get it."

"Speak for yourself! And, Phœbe, remember I owe you one for asking father if 'the children' could walk home alone. What did you mean by it cousin? You'll drive me to 'terrify' you, in the Kentish meaning of the word, after all, before I've

done with you. Deborah will tell you what it is," for the woman had joined them for a moment, seeing Phœbe about to take her leave.

"Look in when you can," she said bluntly; and then called Avice to shake and smooth her tumbled frock, and make her as presentable for the walk down High Street as circumstances, and the leaky watering-can, would allow.

"You've kept your word once," said Gideon, with a more courteous leave-taking than that of Deborah; "happen it won't be as long as a month before you look in again. We'll be glad to see you whenever it be."

It was near evening now. Behind the cottage the shadows were long, but in front the level rays of the sun streamed down the lane, making the hawthorn hedge a more vivid green, lighting up the laburnum blossoms, and falling straight

and full upon the little gate, into the porch, and through the kitchen, where, being reflected from the latticed window, they dazzled Deborah as she took up her needlework once more.

Phœbe, moving down the garden, with the hand of Avice in her own, and Tim hanging boy-fashion on her arm, moved in a path of sunlight. When, having opened the white gate, passed through and closed it after them again, the three cousins stood still for a moment to look back at the small ivy-covered house, the group would have made a good subject for a painter, for the child's white frock contrasted with Phœbe's long black dress, and the bright young faces were set in a background of rich green.

Coming towards them down the green lane, walking also in a sunlit path, came two small childish figures, poorly dressed and shabby, the figures of a boy and

girl, hand in hand, and walking slowly, with hesitating glances now and then from side to side, as if not sure of the road, or which was the right way to take, or which of the few houses there was the house they sought for. The boy, a small pale child, who limped in his walk, clung to the girl, and seemed to depend upon her to support his wavering, uncertain tread; but she, catching sight of Phœbe, ran forward a few steps, and then stood still and clapped her hands, and turned to him again, crying out joyfully,—

“Lor’, now, only to think of that! Why, Don, she’s here!”

At sight of her, and at the sound of her eager voice, Phœbe too stood still, and exclaimed in great surprise,—

“Why, Fib! Fib! Fib! Can this be really you? My little Fib down here in Calminster!”



II.—PHOEBE'S FRIENDS AT LAST.

„ **W**HY, they are nothing but beggars ! ”

Avice was astonished at the surprise and evident delight of her cousin at the unexpected sight of Fib and Don.

“ They are Phœbe’s fine friends come to look her up at last,—the costermonger’s family,” said Tim, laughing.

“ What brought you here ? ” asked Phœbe of the children ; “ what change of fortune can have brought you here, my little Fib ? ”

“ We’ve come to grandfather,” Fib said, finding it, as children do, difficult to

enter into explanations on the spur of the moment.

“And who is he?”

“Gideon Fagge, the man as does gardening jobs, and lives in a house all over green, in the Minster Lane, first turning to the right.”

Fib repeated the words as though they were some lesson learned by rote, as indeed they were, her friend, the carrier, having taken no little pains to impress them on her memory.

“Then you have found your way to the right place, for Gideon Fagge lives here,” and Phœbe led Fib to the gate, and called across it merrily,—

“Grandfather! Look who has travelled all this way to see you. Grandfather!”

The old man came into the porch. He seemed bewildered—dazzled by the light perhaps which shone full into his eyes, for he put up one hand to shade them—

and there in the sunshine he saw Phœbe standing with her hand upon the shoulder of a ragged child.

“Who called?” he said in a hurried, broken voice; “who called me grandfather? Phœbe!”

“That’s me, sure enough, though I never knowed it when you asked me—it’s my christened, catechism name, for father told me so,” explained Fib, looking up into the face of her newly-recovered friend.

Phœbe was amused to think how instinctively she had felt inclined to answer to her own name, heard suddenly even from lips that had no right to use it.

“It is my name too,” she said; “and now tell grandfather all about yourself and Don, and tell me too, for indeed I am quite curious.”

Gideon had come down to the other side of the white gate, and stood looking across it at the children; Deborah, who

had followed him with her needlework in her hand, stood looking also, with an expression of mingled astonishment and anger on her face.

"Grandchildren! Pack of nonsense! Do you think I'm going to believe it rains grandchildren in these parts, that they should spring up sudden when no one ain't expecting it, like this?" she said loudly.

"*Didn't* you expect them, then?" asked Phœbe.

"I never so much as knowed that he were married," said Gideon; "but he might have been, and they've got the name right enough, Deborah."

"Father said we'd find you for certain waitin' for him still," Fib began, a little anxiety in her voice; it had not struck her that she would have to prove her own identity and that of Don; she began to feel puzzled how to do it best. "I

didn't know as we *had* a grandfather till three days ago, and father said there wasn't no fear we wouldn't find you, seein' you was waitin' always. And Don, he's been bad, and it's fresh air and good living he wants; see here, he didn't use for to look like that, he had red in his cheeks once, and could eat hearty, and now crusts and that don't seem to satisfy him, and I'd nothing else to give him, though I've always done the best for him I could, and so I took and brought him here." She had pulled the little fellow forward, as she pleaded for him earnestly, almost as if she knew the wee wan face and shrunken feeble limbs would plead more loudly for him still than even her loving voice could do. Who could resist poor little Don? And then with a bright flash of her old common sense, and the shrewd knowledge of the world she could not fail to have become, to a certain

extent, possessed of in her rough life, Fib nodded sagaciously towards Phœbe, and added, "I've got a person to speak for me; *she* knowed us in Nicholl's Row, and knowed father, and knowed Mother Gripps." Experience had taught Fib that a respectable reference was worth having.

"Is that so?" said Gideon, who looked puzzled and bewildered still, and leant heavily upon the gate as though he felt in need of some support.

"I never knew their surname," answered Phœbe, "but I do know the children well. Don here, when I saw him last, was a fine rosy boy you might have been proud and glad to own; I grieve to see the difference in him now. I've seen their father now and then, and Mother Gripps often," she smiled at Fib as she spoke; "your grandchildren were dear, good, little

children always, and great friends of mine."

"Grandchildren! Pack of nonsense!" Deborah said again, but said it less loudly, and with less assured utterance than before.

Gideon held up his hand:

"Hush! The girl's called Phœbe, and the boy—there never was but one Don, and that's what my lad called hisself, he being named after me. When he was a little chap he took to sayin' as his name was Don, which was taking hold of it by the wrong end, as 'twere, for 'Gid' comes first, if you go to spell it through—but Don he called hisself, and it stuck to him. They've got the names right, and the place right, seein' they've come to a place where a man is waitin' for his son." As he spoke he lifted the latch of the white gate.

The woman stayed his hand,—

“Are you that soft you’d take ’em in? Can you be sure yet? She there,” with a rough gesture towards Phœbe, “never heard their surname; and if they *be* his, ain’t there the workhouse ready? And didn’t I say if ever he come it would be to eat us up, and for no good or comfort to you in your old days?”

“Cannibalism by proxy,” said Tim, who was deeply interested in this adventure, and listened eagerly to all that was going on. Only Avice wondered he or Phœbe should be interested at all, or what anyone could see in two tramper children to make such a fuss about. She did not enter into it, or quite understand what they were all talking about, but stood stripping the yellow flowers from her laburnum branches, and letting them fall all over her white frock, and down into the dusty road, where Don, ignorant of how much was at stake for him and

his Fib, attracted by the unwonted sight, crept to the fallen blossoms, and filled his hands with them.

“I’m sure myself it be my son’s little ones as is at my door to-day,” said Gideon, gravely; “but for your sake, and for his sake, to make it clear I do be bound to put some questions to ’em, Deborah.”

He leant over them and spoke to Fib, standing outside still, her small hands tightly clasped together, her clear eyes raised to his, longing only that Don might be admitted to this paradise of rest and comfort, to whose very threshold she had brought him—thinking only of Don, never pausing to think whether she, too, might not find grandfather’s “good living” more “satisfying” than the crusts in Nicholl’s Row.

“Who sent you here?” the old man began.

"Father; he bid us come."

"How did you find the road, or know where 'twas you had to go to?"

"Mr. Lumber he druv us in a cart."

Gideon looked at Deborah, and shook his head; she looked at him, and shook hers also in return. Evidently the name was strange to them, and awakened no recollection of the children's father, nor was in any way connected with him in their minds.

Quick to see the change in Gideon's face, quick too to notice the look of relief on that of the woman, Fib went on breathlessly,—

"Luke Sims he give us to Mr. Lumber."

"Ay, Sims; that was the man as my lad left with," Gideon said.

"Mr. Lumber didn't take us only to a farm, and there the missus said she knowed you, and spoke up sharp, she

did, about not being a parish to pass on pauper brats," Fib said.

"That do seem like the missis, don't it, Deborah: that's right enough, you may be bound," the old man was smiling now.

"A carrier took us along with him next day, and was very good to us, he was, and talked beautiful,—now Mr. Lumber he didn't care for talk,—and the carrier set us down where he had to stop hisself, and I was to tell you, you knowed where to find him if you'd anything to send back to Thorntree Farm to-morrow—girls or boys, or such like things, he *said*, but I do 'spect that he meant you'd know where to send money for to pay him," Fib concluded, not being used to seeing many kind offices performed for nothing.

"Pay! there'll be enough to pay, you may be sure of that," Deborah exclaimed;

“and you growing old and work scarce at times, and here’s a new burden to be borne on old shoulders, and new mouths to feed.”

As the harsh voice grumbled on, a new idea seemed to strike Fib, an idea suggested by no thought of anger, or of disappointment even, at this grudging welcome, suggested only by her own experience of “burdens to be borne,” and “mouths to feed,” and which might have appeared, nay, would have been in a child with whom the world had fared better than it had done with her, a silly, far-fetched notion enough, but which with her, she being what she was and having lived as she had lived all her days, was a simple, natural, self-evident idea, and nothing more—unselfish perhaps, and very much like Fib, but in itself not wild or extravagant, or what the world calls Quixotic in the least.

“I can work,” she cried quite eagerly; “it’s only Don as wants good living, it’s only Don as wants to be took in. Things didn’t never go very bad with me in Nicholl’s Row. *I’m* strong, you see; my bed’s paid honest for for three nights yet. I can get back, I can, and leave Don along of you, grandfather. It’s only Don.”

Yes, it was always “only Don,” and had been “only Don” for all his life, so far as Fib was concerned. For his own good she would even give him up. This was not like leaving him at Mother Grippe’s? He would be safe here.

“I know it comes hard to fill two mouths,” the child went on, with the oddly quaint manner she wore sometimes, and knowing well how hard she herself had often found it, “but Don’s only one, and father he’ll turn up now and again, or I can earn my own living

easy, if Don may stay here till he's growed a big lad, and fit to work hisself."

She looked over at the pleasant ivy-covered house, and thought how good it would be to have Don here, where he could have milk to drink and daisies to play with, and might grow strong and hearty once again; and then her heart failed her, and she began to cry, but even through her sobs asked her grandfather to let her leave "only Don," and go away again herself.

Phœbe looked on at this little scene and found her eyes wet. Tim, with a choking feeling in his throat, clapped the child upon the shoulder and said, that if ever there was a brick it was his cousin's friend, the costermonger's daughter, and neither Tim nor Phœbe doubted for a moment that Gideon would hesitate to take both children.

in. Nor did he. Opening the gate, he bade them pass through and "come home" at once, smiling a little at Fib's heroic offer, but seeming to consider it hardly worth while to refuse it in so many words, only saying to Phœbe, quietly,—

"She's a good lass, I take it."

"Indeed she is; and, Gideon, you must let me help; I *can* help now, you know, though when I knew these two little ones in London I could do nothing for them except just teach Fib now and then, and go to see her. You *must* let me help."

"Not yet. Thank you kindly, all the same, there's no need for helping yet; if there should be, may-be I'll look to you to do it," the gardener answered, as with many a friendly word of leave-taking to him and to the children, Phœbe and Tim and Avise really did set off at

last, and pass out of sight down the green lane. Deborah looked after them as they disappeared.

“You’ve took them in as you *don’t* want and turned away——”

“I’ve took them in as wants me,” Gideon interrupted her; “as for what we wants ourselves, *that’s* safe to come to us in due time.”

“’Tain’t *my* experience, not that ain’t,” she said sharply.

Gideon occupied himself for a moment in turning a fallen branch of a creeper round the porch, then looked up to say,—

“I wasn’t speaking of what we *think* we want—that is another matter—Deborah.”

“Well, what is it now?”

The children, taking Gideon at his word, had literally gone “home,” that is, had gone into the house and were

sitting now upon the back door step, their small heads visible from the porch.

“What is it?” Deborah asked.

“There be some plants I raise as are that hard to rear, and feeble like, with seemingly no strong hold on life, that if I didn’t touch ’em tender I’d never rear ’em at all, they’d just fade away, even though the soil be good and the treatment fair.”

“It’s hard! you can’t *but* feel it hard yourself,” she said, passionately; “he never was nothing but a trial, and here he’s been and sent his brats to be a trial after him. If they was hers now—if ’twas Phœbe’s girl, you *know* as I’d do for her lovin’——” With these words she sat down on the low bench within the porch, and threw her apron over her head, and burst out crying.

Gideon made no attempt to comfort her. He went through the kitchen to

the doorway where the children were sitting, but before he addressed a word to them he took the straw hat from its peg, dusted it carefully, and hung it up again, sighing a little as he did so.

Phœbe's young cousins were surprised to see how much this little adventure had excited her. Never had they known her talk so fast and eagerly, or have such a pretty colour in her cheeks, or such a sunny light in her eyes. She walked fast too; Avice could not keep up with her; Tim laughed as he entreated her to moderate both her pace and her transports.

"I can't understand why you never heard their name if you knew the children so well as all that," he said.

"That is, because you don't understand how different it is to go amongst poor people in London or in the country. Here, you just go into a cottage——"

“Or we *don't* go,” put in Tim.

“And you know exactly who they are who live there, and all about them. If you do not you can ask the clergyman, or some such other person, but you soon find out for yourself all about father, and son, and grandchildren, and all the family, and get to know the ins and outs of it. It is not in the least like that in London. How can it be, where so many families live in the same house, where they change their homes so often, where they come and go and are strangers to one another, and where those who know them best, and love them most, and work the hardest for them, must needs know them, and love them, and work for them, as ‘the masses,’ as a whole, seldom as individuals at all, for how can they search them out one by one, follow them from place to place, or remember them by name?”

“You seem to have known that respectable individual, Mother Gripps, by name?”

“Oh, yes; I asked hers, and gave mine the first time I went there. She was the woman of the house, and that little ceremony between us was equivalent to ‘leaving cards.’ Every rank has its own conventionalities. Then, too, I heard *her* name often enough from Fib; it never occurred to me to ask that of the children. Christian names were enough for them, and for many like them. Oh, poor little souls, who do not even know they *are* ‘Christian’ names!”

“It takes very little to excite you, Phœbe; calm down, do. Here we are in High Street, and you don’t seem to know how fast you are talking. Avise is looking scandalized already,” Tim said mischievously, though, in his secret

heart, admiring Phœbe for her enthusiasm, and thinking the flush upon her cheek very becoming to her.

She stood quite still and looked at him,—

“It is so good to think that, though we can hardly count or number them, every hair of their heads *is* numbered, Tim; and the poorest, the lowest, the most lost among them all, *is* known by name to One Friend. I’ve thought of that so often, missing faces I had got used to, and not knowing how to trace them; passing through over-crowded courts and alleys, such places, Tim, as little Don and Fib have been called out from to be led here,” she said, and then did “calm down,” took Avice by the hand, and resumed the quietness of demeanour and slower step which Tim declared were only proper in the daily governess of the canon’s daughters.

In spite of Phœbe's quick walking, they had lingered too long before they started to find Mr. Blunt still in Grove Street. He had been gone some minutes, the shopman said, and when they reached home they found him there before them. At the door, the spirit of mischief entered into Master Timothy. Phœbe knew it by the twinkle of his eye, which boded no good to her, and when he dashed into the parlour first, she followed, trembling, to hear her aunt exclaim in a cordial, hospitable tone,—

“Friends of Phœbe's! Oh! I'm glad of that.”

The remark was too evidently a rejoinder to some announcement of her son's!

“You expected her to have desirable acquaintances, you know, and now they are come to look her up,” the bad boy

said, his eyes dancing with fun, which Phœbe did not think was quite kind fun. She hastened to explain.

Mrs. Blunt seemed to make out with difficulty what it was they were all talking of, for Avice, who was tired and cross, exclaimed, "They weren't friends—only beggars," and climbed upon her father's knee to rest.

Tim, nodding his head, repeated in a provoking manner, "London folk; quite swells, of course, as London folk should be," and Phœbe herself was talking of "Gideon's grandchildren."

When she did understand, Mrs. Blunt seemed strangely angry, her niece thought.

"Good gracious, Mr. Blunt, do you hear that?" she cried; "*more* disreputable connections."

"Gideon can't help it. I am sorry for him. He is a respectable man himself;

it is a pity his relations are not the same," said Mr. Blunt, stroking Avice's head as it rested on his shoulder. If the stationer had a weak spot in his heart, Avice touched it; if there was room there for anything besides business, Avice filled it.

"But, I assure you, the little children are quite good and nice," said Phœbe, eagerly, and wondering a little that her aunt should think it worth while to be annoyed at the old gardener having any number of "disreputable connections." What could Gideon's connections be to her?

Indeed, Mrs. Blunt the next moment said something of the same kind herself.

"Of course it is nothing to us who the old man has to live with him, but I can't have Avice taken there if there are to be children about, so please to remember that, Phœbe. If you were to

get her asked now and then to a game of play with your pupils in the Close, it would be a different matter, and more like what I should have expected from you. You *must* feel more at home at the canon's than at a cottage, surely, and the young ladies would be much better companions for your cousin than a parcel of dirty little tramps from London. And you could if you liked, I'm sure of that, only the truth is, you don't seem to care to hold up your head as you might do if you set yourself to it."

Mrs. Blunt was lapsing into vagueness, and Phœbe was glad of it, for she hardly knew what reply to make, or what reply was expected of her. It was a relief when her uncle observed,—

"If Phœbe brings her pupils to buy their stationery at my shop, why, that is grist to my mill, and all in the way of business, which is more to the purpose,

I take it, than trying to get Avice asked to the Close.”

“And the canon, for that matter Sir John himself, and all the gentlefolks in Calminster, are friendly with you, and have a respect for you, and Phœbe here has mixed in genteel society herself!” her aunt appeared to think as much of this fact as Deborah had done, Phœbe thought, half-amused, half-vexed, “and we might be as well thought of as the Dawes; and more too, if you only chose. But if you *prefer* tramps and gardeners, I’ve nothing more to say. I should not wonder, by the way, if Avice had caught a fever, or something of the kind already—the child does not look like herself, Mr. Blunt, and those sort of ragged children always do carry infection about with them, every one knows that.”

It was true that the little girl looked

tired and heavy-eyed, and had, indeed, fallen into an unrefreshing sleep upon her father's knee; but Phœbe shrewdly suspected Deborah's buttered cakes and strong tea had more to do with this state of things than the very distant notice Avice had bestowed upon Fib and Don. She carried her little cousin up to the room opening from her own; and by the gentle ministering to her comfort, which, in spite of her mother's pride in her, was new to Avice, soothed and refreshed her, till finally she fell asleep again, more comfortably this time, and holding one of Phœbe's hands the while.

Phœbe's thoughts kept time to the gentle breathing of the child.

"If Fib must be given up, I have Avice still," was the burden of them; and though she hardly recognised the fact that Avice needed her far more than did her other little friend, she had been

trained to recognise the homely obvious duty of doing the work set before her, and not seeking other work of her own choosing, when time, and hands, and heart, too, could be filled by that. She recalled her father's words, "Give duty and affection *wherever* they are due;" and, dwelling on them as she loved to dwell upon every memory of him, could find but one interpretation for them still—she must please her uncle and her aunt, and yield her own wishes to theirs.

When the tea-bell rang Tim popped in his head. He wore the queer, roguish look, half-deprecating, half-defiant, to which Phœbe was growing accustomed when he had done anything to tease her. She held up a finger warning him not to wake his sister, and joined him on the stairs.

"I don't see the good of saying what you know will vex people, Timothy," she

began, and the bestowing upon him all three syllables of his name had such an effect, and seemed to damp his spirits so much, that she relaxed at once, and gave him one of her brightest smiles.

“Anything for a quiet life; them’s your principles, cousin, I suppose,” he ventured to observe.

“Yes; anything but wrong.”

“And you don’t call it wrong to give up your friends?”

“They do not need me, and I dare say I shall not be obliged quite to give them up. You know we had decided to go very seldom to old Gideon’s, before the children made their appearance at all.”

“*We?*”

“Well, you agreed with me, or ought to have done so.”

“The costermonger’s daughter will think you have forgotten her again.”

That was hard on Phœbe ; she coloured brightly.

“ Poor little Fib ! and how pleased she was to see me ! But Gideon works in the garden in Grove Street ; can't I see him there, Tim, and send the child a message.”

“ Ho, ho ! Clandestine business,” laughed the boy.

“ Of course not ! I'm ashamed of you.”

“ You might see them as much as you please, Phœbe, if only you would be distant and condescending, and not speak to ‘ those sort of people ’ as you speak of them, just as if they were your equals.”

“ I haven't two ways of speaking.”

“ Most people have,” said Master Worldlywise ; “ but I do believe you have not, and that you would be just as happy in a cottage as a palace.”

“ I beg to decline both : Meadowthorn

House is good enough for me," she said, laughing, as Tim opened the parlour door and they went in together.

Her aunt was glad to see how bright a face the girl wore. Very far from knowing the secret of that brightness, Mrs. Blunt could not be insensible to its influence. Certainly the house was pleasanter, the evenings more cheerful, tempers smoother, since Phœbe came. She was an acquisition in that way, if in no other; and if Mrs. Blunt could have felt sure of her niece's imparting to Avice, as she grew up, the refined manner, and winning ways, which struck her as being "so genteel," Mrs. Blunt would have been quite content. The only danger to be guarded against arose from the stupidity—her aunt could call it nothing else—which prevented Phœbe from seeing the necessity of "keeping up appearances," and of how much she herself

might help to do so by a proper use of the advantages she had had during her father's lifetime.

Poor Mrs. Blunt! Phœbe thought it such a pity to worry over appearances at all, to worry over anything indeed, though her unlimited power of sympathy made her sorry for her aunt's troubles, real enough to her, or she thought them real, which came to the same thing.

"Mrs. Dawes called to-day," she said, when the tea-things had been removed, and Mr. Blunt was deep in his evening paper; "she had driven in in her new brougham; Dawes spares nothing, gives her all she wishes for; but though your uncle has not retired from business, and goes grubbing still, and might have what he liked, and I never was one for heaping up riches, thinking it best to be content with comfortable means—such as will command a pretty house, like this, and

a carriage—I drive only a rat-tailed pony still; what do you say to that, Phœbe?”

“That it is more independent and pleasanter every way to drive oneself than to be driven, in any sense of the word,” Phœbe answered, a little nervously, and glancing towards her uncle. She never could get used to his wife’s fashion of discussing him before his face.





III.—AT THE TOP OF THE TREE

“**T**HERE’S a ring,” said Mrs. Blunt.

“*And* a knock!” exclaimed Phœbe.

“I thought I heard a carriage crunching the gravel just now,” said Tim.

“So did I; this hot, still weather one hears everything so plainly,” and Phœbe put down her book and looked at the door.

Mrs. Blunt called Avice to her side, and straightened out the ribbon of her sash.

“I always did say the parlour window should look to the front, so that one might know what was coming upon one; it’s not often we do hear the wheels,

and I hate being taken by surprise," she said.

"One thing I do *not* hear, and that is the pampered menial hieing to the portal," said Tim, quoting from the railway novel with the perusal of which he had been refreshing his mind in the intervals of severer study.

"Good gracious! there goes the bell again. Where can Jane be?"

Mrs. Blunt rose from her chair, and stood listening for footsteps that did not come. Avice gave one or two little jumps up and down, expressive of her state of excitement. Tim opened the door to peep out into the passage and reconnoitre the visitor through the hall window. He drew back quickly.

"The Grange carriage, and my lady herself in it!" he exclaimed in a stage whisper, for the walls of Meadowthorn House were thin.

Mrs. Blunt took Avice by the shoulders and propelled her cautiously into the passage.

“Run and call Jane—quickly now;” and the child immediately did so, at the top of her voice, coming back from the door shutting off the servants’ apartments, to proclaim with equal loudness that Jane “was cleaning herself and couldn’t come.”

Phœbe shook with laughter.

“Go yourself, Tim,” she said, in a choked voice.

“I only do that when it’s no one particular; this is some one very particular indeed. You may not think it, cousin, but I assure you it is a fact that I am very nervous.”

“Some one must go,” Mrs. Blunt observed helplessly; “I am all in a flutter.”

“Nothing to me, mother; my knees

tremble so that I can hardly stand," answered the provoking boy, thoroughly enjoying the dilemma in which his mother found herself, and bent upon hearing the bell again.

But Phœbe, her pretty face dimpling with smiles, pushed past him, trying, but signally failing, to give him a severe look as she went by, and opened the door herself, just in time to intercept another despairing application of the knocker by the hand of the tall footman.

It was a very warm day ; the sun beat full upon that side of the house, the light quivered upon the dazzling white step, and in the sunlight, patiently waiting, sat Lady Bartram. It was rare to see her alone, but Miss Bartram, who was engaged to be married, was away just then on a visit to some relations of her future husband.

"I am so sorry you should have been

kept waiting," Phœbe began, quite recovering her gravity at the sight of the old lady, who was always kind to her, and whom she had learnt to know and like, from her constant visits to the school-room of her young nieces; "the servant is—was not forthcoming just at the moment, so I thought I had better open the door."

"Thank you, my dear; it was good of you not to keep me longer in this blaze of sunshine, and as it happens it was yourself I wish to see," said Lady Bartram, with her accustomed courtesy; but she could not help laughing a little as she spoke.

The voice of Avice was shrill and clear; there was the shadow of a respectful grin upon the countenance of the tall footman.

"You want me," said Phœbe; "is there anything I can do?"

She was still standing by the carriage, in happy ignorance of how deeply she was offending her aunt by thus giving Lady Bartram the opportunity of accomplishing her errand, whatever that might be, without entering the house. She would hardly have sent for Phœbe to speak to her at the door, Mrs. Blunt thought, but Phœbe being there, it was almost too much to hope that her ladyship would take the trouble to come in. However, the Fates were propitious that afternoon; Mrs. Blunt was not to be disappointed.

“There is a great deal you can do,” Lady Bartram said; “we must talk about it. That is what I have driven in for, but I must not keep you out here in the sun. Your aunt is at home, I suppose? If you will allow me, I will come in and see her.”

Accepting the support of Phœbe's arm,

the old lady crossed the matted passage, and was safely landed in the parlour, cool and shady that warm afternoon, and sweet with the breath of flowers, for the little green-house was in full beauty. Tim had disappeared, a scuffling sound in the green-house betrayed that he was making his escape, through the door beyond, that gave access to the garden ; but his mother seemed not only to have recovered her self-possession, but to be in unusually good humour. Indeed, it was a pleasant sight to Mrs. Blunt, that of Lady Bartram seated on the sofa and conversing amicably with Phœbe. As far as the mistress of the house could make out this was really nothing but a friendly call, for they were talking of music, of the approaching marriage of Miss Bartram, and not of business at all ; not, at least, of anything that sounded like business to the ears of Mrs. Blunt.

Lady Bartram admired the room, too, noticing at once some little alterations in the arrangement of the pictures which Phœbe had induced her aunt to make.

“That likeness of Mr. Blunt hangs in the right light now,” she said, “and how cool you have contrived to keep this pretty room. It is so hard to teach people the secret of excluding hot air, at least I find it hard. At the Grange the servants always think open windows *must* cool a room.”

“Phœbe has taught us better than that,” Mrs. Blunt said, willing to give Phœbe her due, since to her the honour of this visit was owing; “I never understood it till she explained it all to me.”

“Ah, it must be very nice for you to have your niece’s company. I quite congratulate you, and *I*, you know, am about to lose the company of my

daughter," Lady Bartram said, with a little sigh.

"It is quite a comfort to have her," Mrs. Blunt answered; "for, with Avice such a mere child, and Mr. Blunt away all day in Grove Street, I assure your ladyship, before Phœbe came, I often had not a soul to speak to from morning to night."

And is this another of your pupils?" Lady Bartram smiled at Avice, who was leaning against her cousin, and fondling her hand: "she does not do you so much credit as Cecy and Grace do. I am afraid you overwork her. Is she strong, my dear? Those deep-set eyes and that full brow do not look fit for many lessons; and, no doubt, living in the same house you have too much time to bestow upon her, and that is a sad temptation to young teachers."

"My niece has very *little* time to

bestow on her cousin. All the mornings with your ladyship's nieces, and three afternoons a music lesson at the Deanery, leaves none too many hours for my little girl, if she is to learn anything at all," Mrs. Blunt answered for Phœbe.

"The less she learns the better, I should be tempted to say, for a year or two to come," Lady Bartram observed, with a glance at the small intelligent face, whose expression had wonderfully improved of late.

"We do very few lessons," Phœbe said quietly, stroking the little hand that was caressing her own, and not thinking it needful to say how much else she did for Avice besides teaching her.

"But about the music, my dear," the old lady resumed; "you will help me, will you not? With Cecilia away I am really puzzled how to manage."

“It is Lady Bartram’s concert,”—
Phœbe turned to her aunt to explain,—
“she wishes me to play, I believe.”

“Of course I wish it! I have not heard you so often on the old school-room piano in the Close without fancying what a treat it would be to hear you on a good instrument. But it is not only that. There is so much to do and arrange, and you must own Cecy and Grace, with the best will in the world, would only hinder if left to themselves. It was my daughter’s suggestion that I should ask you to be my aide-de-camp. She will be back in time to play her part in the evening, but I am quite lost without her till then. Can you give me two days, my dear? Can you come to me on Tuesday? You will spare your cousin, I am sure,” she concluded, with a smile at Avise.

“If I have a holiday—but then, who’ll

do my hair? Mother doesn't like me to be neglected——"

Her mother interrupted her sharply. Was there ever such an inconveniently outspoken child!

"You naughty girl," she began; but Phœbe drew the child closer to her, and kissed the little mouth so famous for ill-timed speeches. "When will you learn manners, Avice?" she said, laughing a little; "and yet she is right after a fashion, Lady Bartram. My free afternoons do belong to her. That is the arrangement I make with my uncle and aunt, in return for the home they give me. You see, it is my aunt you must ask, and not myself; if she will spare me, I should like very much indeed to come."

"Phœbe! I am astonished at you! You are as bad as the child herself. Spare you? Why, of course I can spare you: and I am sure, my lady, she will

be glad and proud to do anything she can, as indeed she ought to be." Mrs. Blunt spoke warmly; she was vexed that her niece should have said anything about the arrangement between them.

"Why not bring the little girl with you?" suggested Lady Bartram, as she rose to take leave; "perhaps that might be the best way. It would amuse her, I dare say, and you would not feel that you were neglecting your duties. We will take great care of her, Mrs. Blunt, if you like to let her come with her cousin."

Of course there could be nothing to say against this arrangement, which was one so exactly after Mrs. Blunt's own heart. True, her thoughts flew straight to the top shelf of the wardrobe in her own room, to the shelf on which reposed, in all its glory, the best frock of Avice; and she suffered some slight misgiving as to whether it were smart enough to

wear at the Grange ; and felt one pang of regret that there was no time to prepare another. But, on the whole, nothing could have met her wishes more completely, and Phœbe rose to the highest pinnacle of favour, while Mrs. Blunt warmly accepted Lady Bartram's offer, and was profuse in her protestations that Phœbe would take care the child was not troublesome.

"Are you to be paid for playing at the concert?" she asked, when Lady Bartram was gone.

"Oh, no ; at least I hope not. I did not understand it so. I go with Cecy and Grace as their governess, and of course their aunt is very welcome to my services, as welcome as Mrs. Bartram herself."

"Then I really can say with truth, that you and Avice are paying a visit at the Grange," Mrs. Blunt cried in a

delighted tone, that nearly made Phœbe laugh; "the house is to be full for the occasion, is it not?"

"I believe so." Phœbe did not feel inclined to enter into particulars, though she had heard of little but this wonderful event for weeks past, so much had it occupied the minds of her two pupils. "I know there are one or two people coming whom I tremble at the thoughts of meeting," she added.

"Now, Phœbe! how like you that is. One never knows where to have you. I thought you were used to society, and here you are preparing, I daresay, to be shy and stupid on purpose to provoke me."

"I never was shy in my life," the girl said, laughing; "it is not shyness, but only a very reasonable amount of modesty that makes me dread playing before the professional performers whom Lady Bartram expects."

“Oh! only professionals.”

“Very fine people too, much grander and more awe-inspiring in every way than kind old lady Bartram herself,” said Phœbe, cutting the conversation short, by beginning vigorously to practise the pieces it had been decided she was to play at the concert.

They heard enough of those pieces in the next few days, for, truly anxious to do her best, she gave neither herself nor the family any rest. Tim went about with his hands over his ears, Avice shocked Phœbe by dancing to a sonata of Mozart's, Mr. Blunt acted audience every evening, and if his wife did complain that the piano was going from morning to night, or whenever the girl was in the house at all, she would not have had it otherwise, being very anxious her niece should distinguish herself.

Certainly it was a pleasant change to

Phœbe, as well as to Avice, the two days they spent together at the Grange. They both enjoyed them to the full. The mere touch of the splendid piano was in itself enjoyment to the music-loving Phœbe, and to be useful was a pleasure to her always. Lady Bartram's concert had for years been one of the chief social gatherings in the neighbourhood. Always on the look out for new players, she had been delighted to find in the governess of her sister-in-law's girls so brilliant a performer as Phœbe undoubtedly was, all the more delighted that she had taken a fancy to the young girl to whom her pupils were warmly attached, and liked to have her about her. All day long in the warm June weather, in the spacious airy rooms, Phœbe busied herself for her hostess. Flying hither and thither with orders to the servants, helping to decorate the rooms, and doing the endless little

offices which form the cares of the lady of the house when a festival is in preparation. Cecy and Grace, who without their governess would have been sadly in the way, under her directions gave help that was really not to be despised. Avice wandered about the grounds, was petted by the housekeeper, came down to dessert each evening beaming with delight at her own dress and the splendour of all about her, amused the whole party by her queer outspoken speeches, and listened open-mouthed to the stories told her by kind old Sir John after dinner. At night the child shared her cousin's room, and gave Phœbe the benefit of all the day's strange experiences.

As for Phœbe herself, she was just as happy, just as blithely content in making herself useful to these kind people, and not one whit more so, than when she

was teaching Belinda, the greengrocer's daughter, or cooking mackerel in the poor London lodgings.

"Well, you *are* at the top of the tree now, Phœbe!" had been her aunt's parting congratulation when the Grange carriage had been sent to fetch the cousins on that auspicious Tuesday morning, and even Mr. Blunt's grave face wore a smile of satisfaction as his little daughter drove away from the gate.

"I was right, you see," his wife observed; "it would never have done to give Phœbe her choice. It is a great thing to have Avice go to the Grange like this, and Miss Bartram just going to be married, and old Sir John and my lady, too, so fond of children, and she such a pretty child, though I say it as should not. If Phœbe plays her cards well she may have the run of the place,

and Avice of course with her,—what is it, child? No, go away. We never give to any one at the door,” Mrs. Blunt broke off in her rambling speech as she became aware of a child standing at her elbow, and saying something in a low, half-frightened voice. Mrs. Blunt thought she was begging. “Go away,” she repeated sharply.

“I ain’t asked for nothing,” the child said then in a louder tone, and holding up a basket she carried on her arm; “I’ve brought the cherries, leastways if this is Meadowthorn House, which I don’t see no meadow, nor no thorn in particular, and it ain’t writ up.”

“Take them to the back door,” Mrs. Blunt said sharply, but the child lingered a moment to follow with her eyes the open carriage fast disappearing down the road, and hardly discernible at all through the thick cloud of summer

dust raised by the rapid motion of its wheels.

“If it was the lady as was in that there carridge, I’d like for to have seen her; I ain’t seen her but once since I come.”

“What lady?”

It was the stationer himself who put the question, being curious to hear how Fib, for Fib it was, would answer it.

“Her as was good to me, and was coming away from grandfather at the time when me and Don got there first. I seed her often in London, and I thought I’d see her now and again here, but I ain’t,” said Fib, with a sigh of disappointment, and her eyes fixed still upon the dusty cloud, but adding brightly in another moment, “may-be she’s that busy she hasn’t no time; I can wait, I can. I’ve noticed you do have to wait mostly for anything you want very bad.”

“It was my niece who was in that carriage, my niece and my daughter. They are going to stay with Lady Bartram at the Grange.”

Mrs. Blunt could not resist making this announcement, though it was made only to Fib; but if she flattered herself the child would be impressed by it, if she thought it would mark more clearly to her how great the difference was between herself and Phœbe, if she hoped it would make her understand that their paths lay wide apart, and never could be expected to meet or touch at all, Mrs. Blunt was very much mistaken. Fib had this, in common with her teacher, that worldly distinctions were only trifles to her. Knowing her own place, and keeping it so well, not thinking herself the equal even of Moggs the buttermilk man, but ready to look up to every one as to her betters and superiors, the child yet knew and

felt there was a common ground on which all met alike, a ground of friendliness and kindness, as well as one of higher interests concerning all alike. It was on this ground she had met and known Phœbe first, and what Phœbe's life might be apart from this was nothing to Fib. Hearing she was gone to stay at the Grange, Fib horrified Mrs. Blunt by exclaiming,—

“Lor’, be she now! Perhaps she’ll come and see me, too, some one while soon,” and repeating that she “could wait,” and smiling cheerfully, the child went off along the gravel sweep, and took her cherries to the back door as she had been bidden.

“Did you hear that?” asked Mrs. Blunt of her husband, turning to him with a flush of indignation on her cheek; “the saucy little brat! I’m sure I’m glad Phœbe was not here to see her, as

likely as not she would have promised to go to the Minster Lane."

"Sometimes I fancy you may be making a mistake," Mr. Blunt said, pausing with his hand upon the gate before he set off upon the walk to Grove Street.

"Mistake ! there was one mistake made in your family, and this is the result of it. The Blunts always did marry respectably till then, and it is certain the Wolds did,"—Mrs. Blunt had been a Miss Wold herself, the daughter of the great corn merchant in Calminster,—“and now when the girl is doing well, I suppose you'd like to see her lose her friends, and to have us looked down upon because of her, instead of her helping her cousins up, which she might do step by step, and here's the foot of Avice on the first step this very day,” said Mrs. Blunt,

alluding to Phœbe as though she had been a ladder.

“They wouldn’t, no one would, think the worse of her for—for being kind to the poor people in the Minster Lane, and it can’t go on for ever.”

The stationer walked away then, down the villa-bordered road where the dust had been laid by the water-carts, and the air was fragrant with the scent of mignonette in the gardens on either side, and the way pleasantly shaded by tall trees. It was too early as yet for the heat to be oppressive. Where the sun’s rays had not reached, dewdrops lingered still, and everything was very fresh and sweet. To many men this daily walk before the day was old, or had been burthened by care, stained with any wrong in word or deed, made wearisome by work, while the page was unsullied still, and nothing of either good or evil written on it yet,

might have been a refreshing thing, an hour to fortify and brace them for the hours to follow—a happy, peaceful time, before they lifted up their daily load, or put their hand to it at all.

Edmund Blunt missed the good of it. He bore his load with him always, hardly can be said to have ever laid it down till sleep took it from him every night, carried his ledgers with him in his thoughts, balanced his books mentally as he paced the pleasant road, associated in his mind only with the thoughts of profit or of loss, and was then as always, in the peaceful morning hours as much as through those spent in Grove Street, a business man, and nothing else.

Perhaps, on this particular morning, he thought a little less of business and a little more of Avice than was usual with him. He was very fond of the child, and latterly she seemed to have

crept closer to his heart than ever ; for latterly, since Phœbe came, the child had grown more childlike and more winning in her ways. The difference was very slight, indeed he was quite unconscious that there was a difference, only conscious that his little daughter grew dearer and dearer to him every day. She had looked so pretty, too, this morning, her mother had been so proud of her, and though too sensible to raise such airy fabrics as his wife built in imagination upon the very slight foundation of this visit to the Grange, Mr. Blunt was not above feeling proud and pleased himself that Avise should be there. He even mentioned the fact with some pride to Mr. Dawes, who, driving in as usual to his place of business, stopped as usual to exchange greetings with his fellow-townsmen on the way.

“Always at the same spot, Blunt; I shouldn’t know you if we met the other side of that lamp-post, and you wouldn’t know me, I do believe,” said the cheesemonger, laughing as he pulled up his horse; “wasn’t that your niece I met in the Grange carriage just now?”

It was then that her father took occasion to explain that Avise was with her cousin, and that they were to stay two days with Lady Bartram.

“She needs help of some kind in arranging her great concert, and has asked my niece to help her,” he said, “and the child, not liking to be left, Lady Bartram was kind enough to say she should go to.”

“They are kind always, and, what’s more, they are good people, and do good. It will be a sad day for Calminster when we lose Sir John, and he is getting up in

years now. Do you know anything of this nephew of his that is to come after him?" Mr. Dawes asked.

The stationer shook his head.

"I know nothing of him personally, either," continued his friend, "but, by all accounts, when his turn comes, the estate and the town property too will be squeezed tight—they say he thinks of nothing but money, money-getting, money-hoarding, as if that was the only thing to do with one's life."

"Money-spending would come next, I suppose," Mr. Blunt said, patting and stroking the bay, who was impatient to go on.

"Ay, or, better still, money-giving: there is so much wanted everywhere. I don't know that I should stick to the shop myself but for that."

"But for what?"

"Why, the being able to go with both .

hands full amongst those who want. And then the town, Blunt, the good old town, that seems really to me like a person, a friend, as one may say; Calminster needs her townsmen to help her, and most of us do our best that way. There is the new Institute, and the Working Men's Club, and Coffee Houses now, they are doing well. You see, Jack being provided for, I mean to make a second son of Calminster, and, that being the case, I jog along here every day still, though it's open to me to be idle at the Oaks."

"You'd not know yourself as an idle man," Mr. Blunt said, answering the only part of the cheesemonger's speech with which he felt any sympathy.

"That's true. I suspect I should fall down out of harness like that celebrated horse that had to be propped up in the shafts to keep him standing. Well, good

morning—see how the bay fidgets. He knows we've overstayed our time by half a second or so," and, giving the impatient horse the rein, Mr. Dawes drove on into the town he loved so well, and which, after having spoken of as "her," he oddly enough called his second son!

It may have been this queer jumble of expressions that prompted the shrug of the shoulders, and the muttered "Poor old Dawes!" with which the stationer looked after the retreating dog-cart, for certainly Mr Dawes did not look much, or indeed at all, as if he were to be pitied.





IV.—A FAMILIAR TOUCH.

ALTHOUGH Phœbe herself had helped to arrange and decorate the rooms at the Grange, she scarcely recognised them on the night of the concert, so strange and bewildering to her was the effect of the lights and the gay crowd of well-dressed people, and it was all more strange and bewildering still when the whole room was hushed and silent to listen to her playing.

She acquitted herself well; Lady Bartram was pleased and satisfied with the success of her experiment. There was a slight stir amongst the audience as Phœbe left the piano.

“Who is she?” people asked each other.

The answers varied, and were more or less correct.

“A Calminster person—Mrs. Bartram’s governess.”

“Ah, yes; Blunt the stationer’s daughter.”

“No, no; his niece.”

“I did not know we had so much talent in the town.

“She is a musical person the dean got down from London to teach his daughter; you know they are music mad at the deanery.”

Such were some of the remarks as Phœbe’s little figure, in the plain black dress, with a rose fastened in the front, pushed its way back to the side of her pupils, who were in a wonderful state of excitement on her account. And then came silence again as one of the

professional performers took his place at the piano.

The first grand, swelling chords struck upon Phœbe's heart like a blow. Surely the touch was familiar to her? The touch of one whose playing we know well *is* as familiar as the voice of a friend. The girl looked up. How well she knew the grave intent face, and knew too how it could be lit up by the brightest of smiles. He had been a friend of her father's; the unexpected sight of him and the sound of the music carried her back to the old days at Clapham, when Frank Lister had criticised her playing, found a spare hour or two to bestow a lesson upon her, and when the little home-like room had been filled with the strains echoing round her now. The very music he played to-night was music her father used to love. Phœbe's eyes were too dim to see her friend any

longer; she sat with one hand shading them, quite lost in thought, and very far away just then from the Grange drawing-rooms, and from Calminster altogether.

She was hardly conscious when the music ceased, hardly aware of the applause that followed, hardly conscious of what went on around her any more after that, till later in the evening, when she and Cecy and Grace were together in the refreshment room, a hand was held out to her, and a voice she knew well spoke her name.

“I was so surprised to see you,” Frank Lister said; “I never connected you in my own mind with this place at all, but the first notes you struck to-night sounded like the familiar accents of a friend’s speech, and when I looked up, why, it was you! You hurried the time a little, by the way.”

Phœbe could not help laughing.

"It would not be you if you did not find fault! Yes, I belong to this part of the world. My father was a Calminster man. My uncle has a stationer's shop in the town. I live here now."

"And—you are alone?"

He hesitated. Phœbe's eyes followed his to the folds of her black dress.

"Yes, alone now," she said, softly—then, remembering that he knew nothing, and how long it was since they had met, she added, "We were quite ruined, I should tell you."

"Was that it? I only know that when I returned from Leipsic, the dear little house at Clapham was deserted, and no one could tell me anything about you. What are you doing now? You have not taken up music as a profession, I hope. You need training still."

"I have only taken it up as far as

teaching it to my pupils goes, for I am a daily governess. I do very well. As for to-night, I suppose Lady Bartram wanted a foil to her grand London artists; it does not do to have a pudding *all* plums, or sweet things *nothing* but sugar," she said gaily.

"Oh, you play well, very well; I am not finding fault; there was a certain amount of inaccuracy here and there, and you took that last Allegro half a beat too fast, and you seem afraid of your *fortissimo* passages even now, you always were, and—but, perhaps, you are out of practice."

How Phoebe laughed!

"Oh, no, you are not finding fault," she said; "but tell about the house at Clapham. I think I have been there and not here at all ever since I recognised your touch to-night, as you did mine. The gorse is yellow now, and the

tall trees throw a pleasant shade, and the gardens are full of flowers ; but here and there the grass must be worn and scorched with the dry weather, and the ponds are low, are they not ? ”—her voice shook, it was of her father she was thinking. The faithful, loving little heart was torn with a passion of regret and sorrow.

Hitherto her life had lain apart from all things or places they had ever seen together. New friends, new scenes, that were unconnected with any memory of him, and not associated with the thought of him, had kept grief at bay, as it were. Still, Phœbe was not one to forget ; there had been times when some careless word, something she read, some beautiful sight in nature, or even some warm lovely day, would wake all her pain at losing him, remind her how desolate she was without him, remind her that the tender, strong tie was broken,

never, never to be reunited on earth, that, come what may, whether she saw good or evil days, whether the days themselves were few or many, her life, her whole life, must be lived without her father. Not till death came to her, too, would she see him any more.

And she loved him so ! With the clinging, passionate love for our “ dear dead,” which is surely *one* of the pledges of their immortality, *one* of the guarantees that we shall meet them again.

Frank Lister understood her well. He did not even drop the subject or try to turn her thoughts aside from it.

“ The dear old common looks itself,” he said, “ and the wee house too. It *was* a wee house, you know. Do you remember we were pressed for space, sometimes, on those musical evenings, and your father would set all the doors and windows open to let out the noise ? ”

Here, noticing that Cecy Bartram had opened her eyes very widely, and seemed puzzled as she, with an ice in her hand, stood listening to the conversation, Phœbe laughed a little and explained.

“It was room for the ‘noise’ we were pressed for, not for guests, for there were none. Only Mr. Lister, and really when he played in that small room, it was not able to contain the sound. Waves of harmony, I do believe, Cecy, need space to move in, just as ocean waves do. How can you put *anything* into a place that won’t hold it?” which scientific question made Miss Cecy stare harder than ever, while her younger sister, gazing intently at the firm, strong hand of the pianist, as it rested on the table, remarked with edifying solemnity,—

“I can believe there was a great deal of noise,” at which they all laughed.

Little Miss Grace had been much

impressed by the rolling chords and magnificent execution of Frank Lister, who decidedly was never afraid of *his* "fortissimo passages," whatever Phœbe might be.

"Do you remember what a festival it was when we went off together to a Monday popular concert, and came home in the Clapham 'bus?" he said.

"But we walked across the Common."

"Yes, by moonlight."

"And old Betty would give us such a cosy little supper."

"And then after it we would open the piano, and have still more 'noise,' Miss Grace."

"By the way, Betty used to say she expected the roof to fly off."

"Have you many pupils now?" Phœbe asked at last, after more of the "do you remember," so pleasant when old friends meet, had passed between them.

“Oh, I do not teach much now,” he answered carelessly. “I have too many engagements, as a conductor, and—well, I will *not* believe in fame, since *you* do not know me as a composer.”

“I am very glad,” Phœbe said simply.

“It is my own music I play next,” he went on; “I am to stay here for a few days; you must let me come and see you; we ought not to remain here longer, I suppose, just now.”

Phœbe gave him her address, and explained to him at what hours she was at liberty, and likely to be found at Meadowthorn House, negating at once her pupils' kind proposal that Mr. Lister should call on her in the Close.

“What, and interrupt the lessons! No, indeed, Miss Cecy, that would never do,” said Phœbe; and then they all went back to the concert-room, where, after Frank had played his own composition,

the event of the evening was over, as far as Phœbe was concerned.

The "few days" the pianist had spoken of spun themselves out into weeks, for Lady Bartram was interested in the young composer, and it delighted her that some work he had now in hand should be carried on under her roof. They enjoyed a feast of music while Frank Lister stayed at the Grange. Cecy and Grace were for ever in and out from Calminster, and Phœbe with them, and as Phœbe's old friend paid frequent calls to Meadowthorn House, Mrs. Blunt was satisfied at last.

How she did enjoy saying to Mrs. Dawes, or any of the numerous Wolds who from time to time frequented her drawing-room, when Frank's ring was heard,—

"It is a friend of my niece's—a gentleman staying at the Grange."

As for him, the young man would come in even when Phœbe herself was not at home, for he seemed to have lost his heart to Avice, who at all events had lost hers very thoroughly to him. The child was not strong that summer. Lessons were dropped entirely. She grew languid, and her head ached often. One of her chief pleasures was to hear Phœbe's friend play. At Meadowthorn House, Frank made very little "noise." With the child at his feet he would play softly, air after air that seemed to take her fancy, and perhaps felt himself more than repaid for any trouble he took, when Phœbe thanked him.

"I have seldom seen a sweeter little face, and there seems to be at times the dawning of some new expression in it, a look that interests me inexpressibly—or is it nothing but a fancy of my own?" he said, one day when Avice had wan-

dered into the garden and he and Phœbe stood together in the window watching the child.

“I know what you mean: I see it often,” Phœbe said; “she is a dear little thing, and grows more gentle and more happy every day—but I wish she grew stronger too.”

She was far from attributing any change in Avice to her own influence, which, indeed, was one that to be an influence at all, or to have any power, must always be unconscious. Like light, it gives light to others just because, shining so clearly in itself, it cannot in the very nature of things do otherwise. To keep her own flame burning, that was Phœbe’s chief concern, without much thought of kindling any other. But a warm and steady flame is very apt to kindle that which comes into close contact with it, and little Avice, from her tender youth,

and from being left much to Phœbe's care and guidance, was turning slowly to this light, as flowers turn instinctively towards heaven's sunshine.

"You believe in happiness still, then," Frank Lister said, in reply to that last remark of Phœbe's.

"Do not you? It does puzzle me what people can find to be unhappy about, as so many are."

"Your father was a very different man from your uncle," was Frank's next remark.

He spoke rather absently, for, having soon ceased to wonder, since making Edmund Blunt's acquaintance, that Harold had left Calminster when it was open to him to do so, he was just now wondering that Phœbe should be so much her own sweet, cheerful self in the midst of a moral atmosphere that must be quite as uncongenial to her as it could have been to her father.

“ My uncle is so good to me, and, you know, I am a sad trial to him at times, when I will not undertake all that is offered to me, but insist upon a little breathing time to myself, and won’t give up my half holidays,” she said, for, yielding as she was, Phœbe knew that her business engagements were her own affair, and kept the control of them in her own hands.

She had plenty to do since the concert at the Grange, and might have had twice as much, for every one in Calminster and the neighbourhood seemed suddenly seized with a desire to take lessons, or to give musical parties. It worried Mr. Blunt beyond words to see good money thrown away, as he called it, when Phœbe declined any offer of employment. It drove Mrs. Blunt half wild that the girl would not pick and choose, but was just as pleased to play for Mrs. Dawes, at

the Oaks, as to play at the Deanery itself. Phœbe laughed through it all. To her uncle she said it would be killing the goose that laid golden eggs to undertake so much as would leave her no time to keep up her practice, or keep nerves and spirit fresh by proper recreation. To her aunt, that one chief charm of the parties at the houses of their fellow townspeople, was the fact that her aunt herself, little Avice in her best frock, her uncle with his grave smile, were amongst her audience and could share her triumph, while Tim, radiant with delight, and splendid in attire, with a flower in his button-hole, could be her escort.

And when Mrs. Blunt gave a party herself, at which all the Wolds were present, and Tim and his ally the Jackdaw convulsed every one with their monkey tricks; and Avice, to the ill-concealed pride and delight of her teacher,

played a simple arrangement of the "Blue Bells of Scotland," and a perfectly amazing amount of good things to eat disappeared, Phœbe was really better pleased, and far more amused, than she had been at the Grange. So much amused, that her uncle forgot to grumble as usual on such occasions at his wife's too extensive hospitality, and payed the bills quite cheerfully when it was all over. Phœbe, too, saw nothing at all extraordinary in Frank Lister volunteering to play for them, though Mrs. Blunt was thrown by it into a state of the wildest excitement, and expressed herself so exceedingly grateful for his condescension, that he had much ado to keep from laughing in her face.

It was the day after this grand affair that Phœbe and Frank stood talking together in the window, while Avice's wandering steps, as she sauntered upon

the lawn, were closely followed by those of a large grey cat, that solemnly kept pace with her, and when she stood still, arched its back and rubbed up against her, purring.

Frank had come to say good-bye. His visit to the Grange had come to an end, but he was to return in time for the festivities upon the occasion of Miss Bartram's marriage. He had many charges—scoldings she called them—to give Phœbe with regard to her own practice and to her teaching of Avice, but brought them all to a rather abrupt conclusion as the click of the stationer's latch-key was heard in the lock of the hall door—all the other doors standing wide open because of the heat—and his footstep sounded in the passage. Mrs. Blunt came into the room at the same moment. Tim rose from the patch of shade under a lauristinus, where he had

been recruiting his exhausted energies ever since afternoon school was over, and strolled towards the house, and Avice, catching sight of her father, joined him at once, not running to meet him as she used to do, but walking languidly still, though her face was lit up with smiles.

Frank Lister took leave of the whole family together.

“I hope we shall see you when you are here again; any friend of my brother’s——,” Mr. Blunt began.

“Any friend of Sir John’s,” his wife took the words out of his mouth, “will always be so welcome. My little girl here will break her heart to say good-bye, won’t you, Avice?”

“No,” said Avice, “I’ll wait till he comes back. Phœbe is going to wait, too.”

There was a fine colour in Phœbe’s cheeks, but Frank shook hands gravely

enough, promised Avice that he would surely come again before long, and bid her play her scales every day for his sake, and then went off with Tim, whom he invited to walk with him as far as the lodge gates.

“It is just possible they may meet Sir John, and in that case I am sure Tim will go further than the gates,” said Mrs. Blunt, with a sigh of satisfaction, as she watched them start.

Phœbe was angry with herself the next morning for feeling as though some pleasant excitement had gone out of her life, and left it less interesting than before. She lay watching the dawn creep through the painted window-blind, the light growing stronger and stronger by slow degrees, till the impossible green and blue landscape was fully revealed in all its splendour, and felt wonderfully disinclined to rise and set about the daily

tasks, which looked a little dull and wearisome to-day. Instead, however, of yielding to this mood, Phœbe started even earlier than usual for the Close, and had time when she got there for one turn up and down under the three tall elms, and for a long look at the cathedral she was beginning to love so well, that she rejoiced to think her day's work began always under the shadow of its walls.

It happened to be one of her half holidays, the days she had vexed her uncle by insisting upon keeping free, and having got through her duties with the two girls, who certainly never guessed it was an effort to her just then to be as bright and cheerful as usual, Phœbe bethought her of her friends in Rose Street.

"I need something refreshing," she told herself, "and can think of nothing better, or half so good, as those dear old

ladies. I will take Avice to see them, happily *that* is not forbidden yet," and her thoughts flew rather sadly to little Fib.

Turning in at Grove Street, however, Phœbe found not only Avice, but the Miss Freers also there before her. Miss May wanted writing-paper, and both ladies were enjoying a chat with Mr. Blunt; they turned to greet Phœbe warmly.

"My dear, you have quite forgotten us of late," said Miss May.

"But we know how busy you are, and do not grumble; oh, yes, we hear fine things of you," said Miss Joy.

"I was coming this afternoon," Phœbe answered, smiling; "but it is so pleasant here. Won't *you* pay *me* a visit instead, and come into the garden?"

It *was* pleasant. Through the open door into the passage leading to the

garden came the rich sweet scent of new-mown grass, and the sound of that mowing machine that Gideon was using just then upon the miniature grass plots. Avice stood in the shade watching the daisies as they fell fast before the cutter, or filling her hands with the short sweet grass, and scattering it as she carried it to the barrow. She was supposed to be helping Gideon.

"*You* remember the musical sound of the sharpening of the scythe in the early morning, Mr. Edmund," said Miss May, shaking her head at some remark of Phœbe's about liking to hear the machine at work.

"Indeed, I do. Harold and I have been awakened by it very often, in the little back bedroom where we slept as boys. This generation would hardly recognise the sound if they were to hear it," the stationer replied, looking just

then as though memory were busy with his thoughts.

“ I wonder Gideon condescends to the mowing machine : he does not like new ways,” said Phœbe ; “ may I go and speak to him, uncle ? I want to send a message to his grandchild.”

“ Surely ; take Miss May and Miss Joy into the garden, if they will be so good as to honour you with a visit,” Mr. Blunt answered ; for behind the counter he was politeness itself, and, whatever the rest of Calminster might do, never forgot the days when a visit to Grove Street from Dr. Freer’s daughters *was* more or less of a condescension.

They passed through the blaze of sunshine falling hot and strong upon the oilcloth of the cottage and half the little garden beyond, the other half being in cool shade from the high wall and a magnificent tulip tree. Phœbe noticed

that Avice looked whiter than ever as she stood by the mowing machine talking to the old gardener, and called to her to come into the shade.

“Directly,” the child said; “I only want Gideon to tell me if the strawberries are ripe.”

“Ripe, missie! Why, they’re a’most over. It is many a one of ’em you’ve eaten, too, though you ain’t been down my way to eat ’em there this summer. Why was that, missie?”

“Oh, I can’t come now, there are children about. I should catch things, mother says.”

“That’s what she says, is it? Well, if so be she thinks that, you are best away.”

“How is my little Fib?” asked Phœbe; “and how do you all get on?”

“Well enough. Deborah do say the child is most old enough for a little place

of some sort, but I don't care for to separate the two of 'em, and I do care for her to get a bit of schooling. She frets above a bit by times."

"Frets! that is not like Fib."

"From what I've seed of her, I should reckon it *was* like her for to think a deal of them as had been good to her, and for to wish to see 'em now and then."

"Oh," said Phœbe, in such a remorseful tone, that the old man looked at her smiling.

"'Tain't no fault of yours; little missie here have made that much clear to me by what she said just now, and I'll make that much clear to Fib."

"But I will come. Hitherto when I have had spare time at all, I've felt bound to take my cousin out, and go where she went, but I will take time to come and see Fib by myself some day."

"You would be surprised at the change

for the better in the little boy," Miss May observed, for she and her sister had been often to visit the children, nor would Phœbe have been content so long without having had news of them from these good friends of hers.

"If Fib should want a little place," she said now,—“oh, Miss Joy, *don't* you want a little maid yourselves, you and Miss May?”

“Why, of course we do, or we shall before Fib is ready for us; at least, we may as well want one, Joy, don't you think?” Miss May exclaimed, for neither of the old ladies ever were known to say “no” on the impulse of the moment, though very often obliged to say it on second thoughts.

“We want to hear how you like your busy life, and to be sure that you are not overworking,” Miss Joy said, by-and-by, as they sat under the tulip tree, and the

mowing machine was silent at last while Gideon swept the tiny lawn, which looked like velvet.

“I like it very much, and I do *not* overwork, and I am very happy here, but I have wanted so long to ask you, you who knew my father so well, whether—whether you knew,”—Phœbe hesitated, for the name so seldom spoken in her life seemed something sacred to her,—“did you know my mother too?” she said at last.

At that moment Avice gave an exclamation of dismay. Gideon, usually so careful, had set his foot in the middle of a fine geranium, which was quite crushed beneath his tread.

Miss May looked at her sister in surprise.

“We did not know her, dear,” she answered softly.

“Nor who she was?” said Phœbe.

“Surely you know that yourself?”
Miss Joy said.

Phœbe shook her head.

“I only know my father never spoke of her, and yet must have loved her dearly. See, her ring was on a chain about his neck, and I took it from him after he lay dead. I only know in all my life, which was so happy with him always, I still felt a want, still missed something other children had; and lately, since I lost him, I have thought this must have been because I had not even any memory of my mother—did not even know her name,” Phœbe’s eyes were full of tears.

“Did he never speak of her at all?”
it was Miss May who asked the question.

The old gardener apparently found something requiring his attention close to the group under the tulip tree. There were one or two dock roots, those enemies to smooth turf, just in that spot; he

knelt down to remove them carefully with his knife.

“He just mentioned her the very day before his death, and told me he did not even know whether any of her people were living still. The fancy has weighed upon me since that he regretted this ignorance of his, that in some way he blamed himself for it, or for having lost sight of every one. It has been a distress to me to think of this. I know he told me if ever I did meet any of my mother’s family——”

The knife had dropped from Gideon’s hand, and he looked up to listen, but Phœbe said no more. For, after all, what *had* her father told her? His speech had broken off abruptly. She could only fill up, by her knowledge of him, by her sympathy with every thought of his, by her remembrance of all the lessons he had instilled into her mind,

the blank that he had left, and imagine for herself the words he would have spoken.

“You should ask your uncle, dear,” Miss May said, kindly; “that your mother died when you were born—within a year from her marriage—is all that we know, or that we can tell you.”

“It was because of her early death that your father lost sight of all her family, no doubt,” said Miss Joy; “that is not an uncommon case. I remember we were very much surprised that your father and your uncle did not go into partnership at Mr. Blunt’s death; and very pleased when your father himself came and explained that, since it seemed no longer his duty to make money, he having enough for comfort, something for pleasure, and something to give away, he felt he might please himself

“We agreed with him so entirely, you know,” the other old sister took up the tale; “ever since he was quite a boy, and used to come on half holidays to my father’s library to beg the loan of a book, he had been a great favourite of ours. It seems so long ago now, and yet like yesterday. We always used to buy our pencils, and such like things, in Grove Street, and it was quite one of our treats when my father walked there with us. We liked to stand and listen to him when he got talking, as he often did, to Mr. Blunt.”

“And do you remember Harold Blunt would listen too?” Miss May put in, “leaning on the counter, and forgetting all about business, so that customers would come in at times and remain unnoticed, so deep in conversation our father and Mr. Blunt would be, and so engrossed we young ones—ah, yes, dear,

we were young then,"—she concluded, for Phœbe was smiling to see how far the sister's thoughts had wandered from her affairs to linger amongst the pleasant memories of their youth. "The customers would have grown angry, too, now and then, for, you see, they did not come here to discuss the last review, or to talk politics, but to buy what they needed, and naturally they wished to be attended to; often they would have left the shop, we fancied, and taken their custom elsewhere, if it had not been for Edmund."

"*He* always had his wits about him!" exclaimed Miss May; "we used to laugh to see how he would touch his father on the arm to recall his attention, and how he would look daggers at our father, whom he could not interfere with, of course."

"The dear old shop in Grove Street

could tell the story of our lives, May: how we used to come as little girls together to buy paints."

"And pictures to paint, too," Miss May said, quite eagerly; "penny ones; you remember the 'Brigand,' and a lady with wreaths of roses all about her, and the 'Sailor,' the typical sailor, always dancing a hornpipe. There are no such 'pictures to paint' now as those heaps of penny ones Mr. Blunt would lay on the counter before us to choose from, and what an important choice we felt it was—there may be better ones, of course, but just like them there never will be any more again."

"We learnt to despise them ourselves when we grew older, and went more often for drawing paper and good pencils than for anything else, except at Christmas time, when we bought presents at the fancy counter for every one we knew.

Mr. Edmund does not seem to have such pretty things in the shop as used to be sold there then."

"Papa had to pay for them, even for his own, which was generally a paper-weight. We must have given him a great many in our time, Joy. The Christmas gifts went down in the bill, and papa paid it always;" Miss May had lapsed into the language of those far-off days she spoke of.

"It was quite dreadful to us when *we* had a bill ourselves—a running account in our own name. One of the signs of how lonely we were growing," said Miss Joy, with a little sigh.

"But together still, sister;" Miss May reached out her hand and touched Miss Joy softly on the arm. They had both forgotten Phœbe.

"And by-and-by no account at all; for we found the only way to keep out of

debt was to pay ready-money for every little thing we buy. So we hand our shillings and sixpences, our pennies too, May, over the same counter where we used to pay so honestly, out of our weekly sixpence, for the pictures to paint."

"And we stand at the counter together still, sister. In all the changes Grove Street could tell of, it can tell of no change in us."

"Yes, together, still, thank God," Miss Joy said, very softly.

There was a silence then, which Phœbe at last ventured to break, by asking how the old ladies had first heard of her father's marriage?

"It was Mr. Edmund told us of it, after his brother had left. It must have taken place immediately upon his leaving; we said it was hard on the Calminster lasses, my dear, that he could not have

found one of them to suit him. And then the sad news came that our old friend was left with a motherless babe, and we could not be merry any more about his neglect of the pretty town girls. But you should speak to Mr. Edmund, and ask him what you want to know," said Miss May.

"I will," said Phœbe.

She rose from her seat as though she meant to ask him then and there, but Gideon, shouldering his broom at the moment, paused, as he crossed the lawn to the small tool-house, to observe that there were customers in the shop.

Through the open doors figures could be seen moving about. The dean's shovel hat was conspicuous. Presently a girl came to the garden door, and, shading her eyes from the glare, called Phœbe, timidly. It was Cecy Bertram.

"Miss Blunt," she said, "we do not

know the right sort of tracing paper to get for the maps. Could you come and show us ? ”

Phœbe went. As she transacted the little piece of business, looking now and then in the quiet, grave face of the stationer intent only upon serving his customers, she felt it would not do to speak to him in Grove Street on this subject so near her heart. It was a busy afternoon, too, and Mr. Blunt was not at leisure any more while Phœbe stayed, for in the cool of the evening she took Avice for a walk, and forgot herself and her own affairs entirely in watching how languid the once elastic step was growing and noticing how burning was the small hand that clasped hers so fondly.





SUMMER EVENING.

IN the warm summer weather, when the odour of decaying vegetables or of stale fish, that filled the air, did not—because recognisable of what it was—seem so bad as that other nameless odour of general stuffiness and dirt pervading the whole street, Nicholl's Row, never a pleasant place, was at its worst.

The bells were ringing for service, for it was Sunday morning, but few heeded them. People were lounging in the doorways, and leaning from every window in the vain attempt to inhale a breath of purer air than that obtainable within

doors. Owing to the fact of those amongst the inhabitants who, on week-days, were away at work, being idle now at home, the street appeared even more crowded than usual. More sickly children swarmed there at play, more untidy women stood gossiping with their neighbours, more men, most of them with short pipes between their lips, leaned up against the walls, slouched along the pavement, or gathered in a group near the Three Crowns, waiting till the hours of morning service should be over.

Mrs. Gripps, with nothing in her appearance to betoken that this day was different from any other day, knowing indeed no difference in it except that it was one she was free to spend in doing nothing if she chose, came up her broken steps and looked into the street, and then drew quickly back again—not quickly enough, however, for Fib's father had

caught sight of her, and drew near with an odd smile upon his face. Of late it had been her turn and not his to drop down lanes and alleys, and so avoid a meeting if she could; to keep away from her own house or hide herself should he come to seek her there; to do her utmost never to run in his way at all. And he enjoyed the change. Brought to bay at last, Mrs. Gripps put as good a face upon the matter as she could, and though she had never heard of the children since they had so mysteriously disappeared, actually exclaimed at sight of their father, or rather when she realised that to speak to him had become unavoidable at last,—

“ Well, and how do *you* get along with the brats ? ”

“ Whatever do you mean ? I ain’t been round here this long time, and when I did come you was out. You’re out a goodish bit now, Mother Gripps. Don’t

Fib do your errands for you no more ? How are the little 'uns ? ” said the man, seeing at once the line she intended taking, and delighted at the opportunity of paying off old scores by giving her a fright.

“ You know best how they are,” she said shortly.

“ How should *I* know ? I ain’t seed ’em even this long while.”

“ They’re gone then. Of course I knowed they was gone to you and no-where else, seeing they had no-where else to go to ; therefore you ain’t no cause to go throwing up your hands and eyes like that.”

“ You don’t mean to say you’ve been and done that bad by ’em as Fib couldn’t stand it, and have cut and run ! A child like her on London streets alone ! ”

“ London streets won’t hurt her. She was bred to ’em,” the woman said uneasily.

“And the little lad too! and he sickly. Is he alive or dead by now, Mother Gripps?”

“You took and deserted ’em,” she said.

“I took and left ’em along of a responsible woman and paid honest for their keep. Do you know there’s law in the land, Mrs. Gripps? eh, do you know that?”

“Law! what can the law do to me?” she tossed her head, but trembled secretly.

“Do to you? It can call you to account——but there, what’s law after all? Think of a father’s feelings, Mrs. Gripps; think of that.”

“Gammon!” said a voice behind him; the word was followed by a low chuckling laugh.

Luke Sims stood there, but Luke resplendent in a tidy coat and well-brushed hat, and yet with the somewhat sheepish

air and manner of a man who feels himself too well dressed for the society he is in.

“Whatever shines are you up to now!” cried Fib’s father; “if it weren’t that the swells is all out of town at this present time, I should think you was going to look in at your club in St. James’s.”

“Get your own Sunday coat out of pawn, and don’t go laughing me out of countenance,” said Luke; “and gammon about ‘feelings :’ who as knows you don’t know you ain’t got none, nor never had? The brats are all right, Mother Grippe, and Fib left you a message.”

“Did she now?”

A look of relief passed over the hard, cunning face. This woman had actually missed the children. Apart from the selfish dread that she might possibly be held accountable for any harm befalling them, it was not pleasant to wake at

night and wonder where they were ; to be haunted by fancies of starved boys and girls ; to miss Fib's handy way and bright words ; to have the back kitchen crowded and paying well, but not to be able to forget that those two young heads had perhaps no shelter now at all. It was a real relief to her to hear they were "all right."

"Fib would have called to say good-bye," continued Luke, "knowing it weren't manners to leave so uncere-monious, but there weren't no time to spare, so she said she'd look to seeing you again in another place."

"Where's that?" Mrs. Grippls, standing half-way down the broken area steps, looked up at Luke.

"In heaven."

"Heaven!"

Luke nodded. "A long way off from you and me, ain't it? not so far off from

Fib, I'm thinking ;" and stepping back, he gave a half shy greeting, only a rough nod, to the minister of the little chapel who passed at that moment, and nodded in return.

"What's up? Are *you* turned pious, Luke?" Fib's father said.

"Not altogether—only being of an inquiring turn of mind and fond of travelling, I thought I'd just ask the way to that place as Fib was speaking of. I've knowed a many as *said* they was on the road to it, but no one—only Fib—as seemed walking straight in that direction. It can't do no harm to follow on a bit at anyhow, and see where 'tis it leads to."

"I know one beside Fib as walks that path. I don't know as it's led him to any particular good thing yet," said the other man.

"I thought that one you mean was

standing still," Luke answered dryly; "I thought he was waiting: and that may be a good thing for you some one day, and has been for the brats already."

"They come to you to start 'em, then?"

"They did. For a feeling man you've been a length of time asking as much as that," and Luke's irrepressible laugh broke out again.

"Oh, I got six weeks just after I seed 'em last, and I ain't been out long; and since I *have* been out, I've had to dodge Mother Gripps here,—you wouldn't believe *how* I've had to dodge for her,—and she so uncommon shy and hard to catch, I ain't had a chance to hear of my own little 'uns, not till to-day." He too was laughing now, and showed no shame at all at the avowal of having been boarded and lodged at the national expense for those six weeks he spoke of.

A short time ago Luke also might have thought nothing of such a confession, but for some reason or other he looked troubled at hearing of it now, and asked what it had been for.

“A triffin’ difference of opinion between me and another gentleman as drives a cab,” Fib’s father answered carelessly, and turning to accompany his friend in the direction of the chapel. “You wouldn’t believe how strange it feels now I’m about the streets again, to know as them little ’uns ain’t looking out nowhere to get a sight of me. I’d got quite into the way when I turned into a public of noticing whether Fib mightn’t be round the corner. Well, there’s no one on the watch now, and it feels lonesome to know that is so.”

“I reckon there *is* some one on the look-out still,” Luke said.

“The old man must have stared to

see 'em come. Why, bless you, he never knowed nothing at all about 'em! He must have been took aback to see another Don in my old place. Heard anything of 'em since?" asked Fib's father.

"Lumber's never been to market no more."

"What's that for?"

"Got throwed out the night he took the children down, and hurt some way badly."

"Was they hurt, too?" Fib's father stood still, struck by a sudden sense that life would be "lonesome," indeed, should anything have happened to the children, so that they were not on the look-out for him anywhere at all, not even at Calminster. He had a vision before his eyes of Fib's ragged figure, of Don's pale little face. "Was they hurt too?" he repeated the question impatiently.

“No; the missis sent ’em on safe enough, and I think it’s about time you went down yourself to see after ’em, and to see after the old man, too. You ain’t done so well in London, I take it, as to break your heart at leaving it, and old folks don’t live for ever,” Luke answered as they reached the chapel door, where the ringing of the cracked bell ceased suddenly just at that moment, and the two went in together, Fib’s father following Luke, perhaps only because of the lonesome feeling he had spoken of, or because he noticed amongst those passing quietly in, figures fully as shabby as his own. However that may be, he did go in and sat down near the entrance where Fib had often sat, and listened to the sermon without attending to it very closely, for his thoughts were far away. And when he went out into the street again he missed the children more than

ever, and wondered it should be so, since he had after all seen very little of them ; and in the evening, meeting Luke again near the inevitable Three Crowns, he looked at him and said, suddenly,—

“It’s fine weather to go on tramp—why not ? ”

Which remark Luke seemed to think a good joke, for he laughed at it loudly, repeating between his bursts of merriment,—

“Why not ! Ah, indeed, why not ? ”

“Hops,” said Fib’s father.

“Right you are,” said Luke, laughing still.

“I’m not thinking of anything *but* hops,” said the other with rising anger.

“To be sure you’re not ! Hops do come handier to the thoughts of a Kentish man than—say harvesting, now ; and hands is always wanted, or was in our time, at the Thorntree Farm, and

that's not so far out of the way for London folk but what they can get back easy when hopping's done."

"Why not come too?"

"Why? 'cause *I* ain't got no one waiting for me—no little girls as was given to dodging round the corners near the publics, and doesn't do so no more; no little boys as used to be on the look-out for father, and not being so now, leaves the streets lonesome; and no old man, patient at the gate for years, and patient still." Luke laughed again as he ceased speaking.

"It ain't no such thing, I tell you," Fib's father repeated, angry still; where-upon Luke became grave at once.

"You might do worse, and I don't see as you could do much better," he said, "if I don't see my way to coming with you,—I having an opening here just now to live respectable" (poor Luke was for

ever having "openings," which his own folly shut up again one after another),—"I might, it's not impossible, see my way to joining of you by-and-by. We come up together, old chap—what years ago it is!—and then it was I as said, 'Come;' now I say, and say it hearty, 'Go,' for it's what I'd do myself in your place."

They parted soon after this, Fib's father saying that should Luke miss him for awhile from their old haunts, he would know where he was, for he thought it most likely he *would* go down into the country, for the hop-picking, and earn a little money, against the winter, he *said*, but Luke knew better.

"There you go," he thought, as he watched his friend down the street, "and once on the road to Thorntree Farm, you're on the right road at last, leastways nigher to it than you have been

yet, since you and I took that 'ere wrong turning years ago. Easy led you was then, and always will be: happen the time's come to try if you can't be led right as soon as wrong."

Standing at the old corner, in the close, stifling air of Nicholl's Row, watching the children playing, or squabbling together in the dirty street, Luke wondered where it was he could have heard the words that came into his head just then, "A child shall lead them."

Had the company of Fib's father recalled the thought of Fib herself, or were the words the echo only of sounds familiar once in very far off days, when Sunday after Sunday had seen him in his place in the old parish church?

That same Sunday evening that was so hot and close in London brought the warm glowing day to a close in Cal-

minster, with a sweet, fresh air that revived the parched plants in Gideon's garden, and made the Minster Lane a cool and pleasant place. Groups of townspeople passed down it now and then, people who had come out for an evening walk, and Fib sat on the front door-step of the cottage, watching them as they came and went, and—of course—talking in the old fashion still to Don.

Don was a different child now. The red had come back in his cheeks, and stayed there always. The feeble limbs were growing straight and strong, the little voice was heard more often, though, faithful to old habits, Don was a better listener than talker even now when Fib and he were together.

“Will he come down there?” he asked, now pointing with a small finger to the cool shady lane beyond the gate.

“Yes; along by the hedge-row, and grandfather will kill the fatted calf, leastways there will be buttered cakes for tea, and you and me’ll have some, Don. And he’ll be that pleased to see you growed so strong and such a man, as he won’t hardly know you, and so he won’t never go back no more to the ‘rioty living,’ which means publics, Don, but come out of the far country, and stop along of grandfather, same as we do,” said Fib, bringing her version of the story of the Prodigal Son to a conclusion.

“Tell about the cross brother,” said Don.

He knew the story from hearing Fib spell it over to their grandfather regularly every evening; the leaves of the Bible, that lay upon the little table under the window, fell apart naturally at that place whenever the book was

opened. Don did not approve of the omission of one of the characters altogether.

“We ain’t got no cross brother, unless it’s aunt,” Fib answered, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, for, though Deborah never by any chance spoke to the children of their father, Fib had not failed to become aware of her sentiments regarding him. “My, what a one for tidying up and putting straight she is!” the child went on. “I *did* use to think I kept the back kitchen clean, but it seems I don’t even begin to know what clean is. What’s the good of cleaning a thing till it’s dirty, says I?”

“What’s the good?” echoed Don, arching his small eyebrows with the funniest imitation of his Fib’s perplexed grimaces.

“Now, aunt she don’t give nothing a chance to get dirty, and yet she’s always

a cleaning of it, and looks to me to do the same. It's uncommon puzzling, and so is manners."

Here Don gave a pull to the lock of hair over his forehead in the fashion that is considered "manners" in that part of Kent, and in which he had been duly instructed in the infant school. Fib gave him a great hug, and told him he "did it beautiful." He took to "manners" more readily than she did herself, for, fresh from the freedom of Nicholl's Row, this poor little waif found civilisation very trying at times, and was above all puzzled by the amount of politeness required of her at the National School. To preface every speech to her betters with the orthodox, "Please, ma'am," which did not, to her mind, always make sense, was a real trial to Fib, and constant curtseys a vexation to her, from her habit of forgetting them,

and incurring reproof, which made the other children laugh at her.

“But, lor, if there wasn’t nothing to trouble one it would be too good to be true. In London there was hard work and hard living, and you ailing, Don, and here there’s manners and cleaning up; and with you getting on so finely, and every one that good to you as you don’t know what a cross word is, I do seem to have nothing left to wish for, special since I seen the lady again,” and Fib clasped her arms round her knees as she sat upon the step rocking herself gently to and fro, and beaming upon Don in his neat Sunday dress, a very contented expression upon her wise little face. “I was glad to see her, I was; it was a good thing I’d had to wait so long first, for it made me all the gladder, and she’ll come again now and then, she promised that much. No, there’s

nothing as we want now, Don, only for father to come soon," she said.

Just then Gideon and Deborah came in sight, walking down the lane together, walking, alone, for, as Deborah was fond of saying, they "kept themselves to themselves, and neighboured but little with other folk, and never had."

They had been to evening service. Deborah wore her red shawl, which gleamed against the green hedge as she came along, and she carried her prayer book folded in her handkerchief; Gideon had a white pink between his lips, a fellow pink of those growing in thick tufts before the door, and perfuming the air with their strong, sweet scent. As they came in sight, Don jumped up and went to meet them. He was at the gate first, fumbling with the latch, when Deborah stooped over and unfastened it,

and caught him up in her arms, and covered his face with kisses.

A wonder had come to pass in the Minster Lane, for this stern, hard woman was the very slave of little Don. He had won her heart from the first, perhaps from his own evident certainty that he was a great acquisition, and that she was glad to see him there, or from his innocent joy in all sweet country sights and sounds, or from the pale cheeks and tottering little limbs that needed her care and called for it so loudly. The helpless creatures that we cherish and are good to grow dear to us, and Don had soon grown dear to Deborah. How proud she was of his rosy cheeks, how glad when the doctor declared that her good nursing would make a man of him after all, and that, thanks to her care, his lameness would hardly be perceptible as he grew up.

“Have you give him his supper? You ain’t never let him wait for us, I hope? nor let him sit on the grass, and the dew falling now?” she said, as she passed Fib, who had not moved till then, but rose, and stood aside to let her aunt go by, with Don in her arms, laying his cheek to hers, and prattling of all he had done during the two long hours she had been away.

There was rather a wistful look on Fib’s face, as she answered her aunt’s questions dutifully, and accounted for her management of her little brother.

“I done for him all his life,” she said softly, as Deborah and the child disappeared into the cottage; but if there was any momentary pang of jealous regret in this thought, it was gone at once: “I done for him when he ain’t had no one that could do better, and now he’s real well off, and oh, I’m glad

as father sent us here ! It's been that good for Don, as I do believe it's saved his life," Fib said, and rejoicing heartily without any thought of self, she left Don to be petted and caressed by Deborah, and joined Gideon at the gate.

By this time the strollers in the lane had nearly all gone home. Now and then a group came past, talking noisily, or two walking together slowly, not seeming to care how late it was, or how long the walk lasted. But such passers-by grew fewer and fewer. In the next garden a neighbour's children were at play. Their shrill voices disturbed the silence.

Then the mother called them in, and all was quiet. The stars began to show, though it was light still. The dew Deborah had spoken of was indeed heavy, soaking every leaf and plant, refreshing

and reviving every green thing, but making the air chilly now with its treacherously refreshing coolness. And still the old man and the child stood watching at the gate. At last Fib touched his arm.

“Your rheumatics, grandfather,” she said, warningly.

He made some impatient movement, then seemed to control himself.

“I’ve stood here in the falling dew at night a number of years now, but it’s true I don’t grow no younger as they pass, and years do bring rheumatics,” he said.

“And he’ll not come to-night,” she spoke, half doubtfully and as though she fancied he they were watching for might be at hand.

“It was down the lane he went away, and that was sudden. It’s on my mind he’ll come back sudden, too.”

“In the morning, grandfather, may-be.”

“‘Joy cometh in the morning’—but then it says, too, ‘at evening-time it shall be light.’”

He was thinking his own thoughts, hardly speaking in answer to Fib, but she answered him,—

“Sunlight—like when Don and I come along, and you was waiting, just as he said.”

“He knows I be waiting still.”

“Oh, yes: and he’d never have sent us not if he wasn’t coming soon hisself. He’s that fond of Don, I know he’d miss him from the streets. Folks said he didn’t care, but he wasn’t never bad to us.”

“You think he’ll come soon now?”

“To-morrow, may-be, or this week. He must be near now, leastways nearer than last week, or last night, nearer than to-day, grandfather, ’cause there’s

another day gone now and can't come back, and that must bring the time nearer," said philosophic Fib.

"How many days have come and gone since then!"

Gideon sighed heavily, then listened with eager attention as footsteps were once more audible in the lane. It was only two gentlemen walking together slowly. As they drew near, Gideon recognised Sir John, who stopped to exchange words with him.

"Too late for old fellows like you and me, Fagge—this falling dew is good for neither of us. What's this I hear of you're giving up so much work in different gardens now?"

"I'm not the man I was, Sir John, and work I can't do justice too I'd sooner let alone," said Gideon.

"And the rent—come, we must make that easy to you."

“It don’t fall hard on me yet, Sir John, the rent don’t, thanking you kindly all the same. I can compass it still, and when I can’t I be bound to make way for them as can. Almshouses be one thing, and decent, comfortable homes for labouring men as can pay for them be another, and that last is what I’d like to see landlords think more of than they do at this present—not meaning you, Sir John, who has been a good landlord—nowhere a better—all your time,” and the gardener glanced at Sir John’s companion.

The baronet was staying in Calminster that night, and had been dining at the Deanery. The man now with him was his nephew, the heir, to whose sense of justice the pleasant homes in the Minster Lane must by-and-by be left. It cost Gideon a pang to think that on the frail life of one frail old man, older than him-

self, it depended how long he could keep up his patient watch at the old spot.

“If we was to move, he’d be troubled to find us,” he said, as the footsteps of the two gentlemen died away again in the distance.

“Oh, he’d find us—he’d be led right,” said Fib, who had no doubt of that at all herself.

“Fib!” The sharp sound of Deborah’s voice broke upon the stillness.

“Can’t you never give the child her right name?” Gideon spoke a little querulously as the woman came down the garden towards them.

“Well, I just can’t then, and that’s the truth of it. It’s a mercy there’s another she is accustomed to answer to. Fib, come away in and get to bed, or you’ll have Don fretting for you.”

Fib went. Her grandfather soon followed; Deborah’s loud-voiced remon-

strances with regard to his standing longer in the damp could not be unheeded, as Fib's more gentle ones had been.





VI.—ON TRAMP.

WONDERING that he could think so much of Fib and Don, and not be able to shake off the thought of them,—wondering that he should miss them as he did, should fancy every now and then that he saw the little figures in the street, and feel so lonely, remembering it *was* fancy, and that the children were far away, Fib's father, having parted from his friend, determined, instead of waiting for the next day, to set out for Thorntree Farm at once.

It would be cool and pleasant too, to walk at night. Before the day was hot

he would have reached green fields and shady lanes, and might sleep under some hedge, or lie upon the grass to rest, as he had not done since he left the country long ago. He pictured to himself the things he had described to little Don—meadows, daisies in the grass, and the child himself at play amongst them; though he did not really look to seeing Don at all, but only to finding employment in the hop-garden, and to earning there a sum of money with which to return to London and start upon the old life again in the late autumn.

Still, though with no intention of joining the children, the man could not forget them, or forget he was on the road along which they had passed, and that each forward step upon it brought him nearer to them. Metaphorically, if no longer literally, Fib did watch for him at every street corner. At the doors of the

public-houses, at every one of which "silent Lumber" had stopped when he had driven that way for the last time, Fib, with her familiar rags, Fib, with her earnest little face, seemed standing.

He recalled so distinctly the touch of the child's hand upon his arm, and the sound of her voice, when she was fortunate enough to meet him before he had crossed the threshold of one of those ever-open doors,—he seemed to feel the touch again, to hear again, 'Father, don't go in just now—not now, father,' and passed the doors to-night, following in his thoughts the little ragged, shabby figure, going on before.

Being Sunday evening the streets were quieter than usual when he reached the suburbs, very quiet indeed. Lights shone in the parlour windows of the small houses in the long straight road, houses that had tiny squares of turf before them

with laurel bushes or a stunted lilac growing there. Every now and then some window, thrown open wide to admit such air as was to be had on that hot sultry night, revealed to the passer-by a picture of the home-life within. A family party, perhaps, gathered round the table, children, parents, all united; prayer-books lying on the window-sill; a girl's hat carelessly allowed to fall upon the floor; the mother wearing her bonnet still as she sat behind the tea-tray; so many signs that they had all come in from some late service. A little further on, a woman sitting reading by the lamp-light all alone. From another window came the sounds of a hymn sung by young voices. In the next, two sat talking together, a young man and a girl; and beyond that again, a minister, wearied out by his day's work and resting now on the blessed Sabbath evening, was

seated close to the open window, and leaning his head upon his hand, and listening to his daughter chatting to him as she hung over his chair. His sermon-case lay on the table by the lamp, and a large Bible near it. Pictures like these might be seen in almost every window in the row. One such picture the tramp outside stood still to look at.

There was no light in this room at all, but a street lamp opposite lit it up, and full in the light of that sat an old man alone, waiting for some one or for something, apparently, for he turned his head now and then, and once rose and went to the window to look out, then resumed his old place again. Just then the door opened, and a younger man entered, laid down his hat and gloves upon the table, and struck a match.

“ Well, father? ”

“ You are late, my son.”

The friendly tone and words might be clearly heard outside. The tramp, standing there listening and looking in, walked hurriedly away.

Down the long, straight road, stretching far away, crossed here and there by the arch of a railway bridge, lit up by lamps for all its length; a lonely road rather on this Sunday night, lonelier still as it grew later and the lights in the windows were extinguished one by one. It would be too late soon even for those flaring gas-lights in the public-house—he must turn in here, he thought, at this one he was passing now, he might have no other chance.

“Father, not just now.”

Fib again! Fib in his mind still—or shall we say his heart? Fib’s little figure on the road before him still.

“You are late, my son.”

Why should he repeat those words

over to himself? Why think of the old man in the open window? Hang it all! he would turn back, back to his old haunts, and be himself again! Why should he be a fool like this to-night?

Could Fib have told him why? Could Gideon, waiting at the gate, have told him why? Could those who pray and wrestle for their loved ones, who bear them on their hearts before God and leave them there, could any of those have told him why?

He did not turn back, but went on upon the road, and never knew or guessed just then that in so doing his feet were set at last upon that other road Luke Sims was seeking, that which Fib travelled on—the road to Heaven.

By-and-by the long street was left behind, the houses grew fewer; then there were no more lamps, and he went on under the stars, and the air freshened

and was cool; and the turf here and there was grateful to his feet, in boots more "busted" than ever, Mrs Gripps would have said, boots so badly "busted" now that he really could not keep them on at all, but left them in the road, and pursued his way barefoot.

It was hardly quite the country yet. The villages lay close together, and were like town villages still, not rural and quiet-looking, though sleeping now; only the dogs barked as he passed, a few people were astir here and there, and by-and-by he overtook a noisy group who were going hop-picking like himself. The men were nearly all tipsy, and some amongst the women; but one woman, walking far behind the rest, a little fellow about Don's age clinging to her skirts, was crying as she went. The child seemed so tired he could scarcely keep upon his legs.

"Pick him up, missis: ain't you no feelin'?" Fib's father said.

"I ain't but just set him down. My back is well-nigh broke carryin' of him. I've had no food since mornin,' many hours ago now."

"I might have had drink," she went on after a moment's pause, "but I ain't took it, and I won't,—I *won't*, nor the boy shan't neither." She raised her voice, and lifted up her clasped hands, and cried out passionately that it was enough for her husband to kill himself, body and soul: he should not kill the child.

"On ahead?" asked Fib's father.

The woman nodded, as she dried her eyes.

"I doubt whether he'll give us money to buy bread, even when day comes again; he's drunk to-night," and she stooped to lift the child once more into her arms.

But Fib's father took him from her,

and carried him as far as their roads lay together,—for this party were not bound for Killock Haugh, and turned off the road about a mile further on,—and when he set him down, put three pennies in the woman's hand, and bade her buy food with it, and was glad that it had not gone in drink before he met with her.

The woman had not spoken for all the mile they walked together side-by-side, but plodded on in dogged silence, with a tired, hopeless look upon her face, and dumb from weariness and grief. When he held the money out, she clutched it eagerly, glancing towards her husband on in front to make sure he was not looking.

“You're a good one! The boy won't starve now,” she said.

“I've a little chap of my own.”

Fib's father thought the child, sleeping now, was very much like Don, Don as

he had seen him last, pale and wan. He placed him gently in his mother's arms.

"It's well for him—your little chap, I mean—to have a good father. May-be you'd one yourself,—I'm sure of it, or you'd not be what you are. Now, my man he never knowed a father, but growed up neglected."

So anxious to make excuses for him, so fearful she had blamed him to this stranger, overmuch! Was she not his wife?

"Good-night, and thank you kindly. You've put a bit of heart into me when I was sore cast down. I'm glad for your little chap, I am, that he has you to look to."

With these last words she went away into the darkness, down a narrow lane, a cross country lane, having high hedges on either side, so that the starlight did not fall upon the road, but left it black.

Almost as soon as she had left his side the man lost sight of her. He stood still listening until the hoarse laughter and loud voices of the noisy party had died quite away, and the night was silent once again. But the echo of the woman's words had not died away with that of the sound of her footfall down the lane. Going on upon his way, a tramp and nothing better, barefooted, ill-clothed, just out of prison, he seemed to hear over and over again,—

“Or you'd not be what you are.”

He had a good father, she was right there; *he* had not “growed up neglected;” but what was he? and *was* it well that little Don had him to look to?

He never remembered in all his life to have given money away before. He had seen Luke do it now and then, and had laughed at him.

To-night the one kind action towards the little child, done for Don's sake, seemed to have brought Don nearer to him.

“ If Don come to grief, and was hard up, and put upon and wronged, I'd be glad to think some one would help him. He'll get strong down in the country ; strong and hearty, and grow to be a man yet.”

What sort of man—“ having him to look to ? ”

He was quite in the country now. There was a sweet fresh scent in the air, and the first cool, clear light of early dawn was stealing up the sky. Passing a stack in the corner of a field, and tempted by the dry hay littered on the ground, by the quietness of the place, far from any building, and feeling tired at last, Fib's father turned in to rest there ; and falling fast asleep, slept long, until

the dawn had fully come, its rosy flush passed away, and the sun was high. Lying in the shadow of the stack, he did not wake until the sun had turned the corner of his shelter, and fell full upon his face. Rousing up then, and laughing at himself for having slept so long, half vexed that he must now tramp onwards in the heat, he set out once more upon the road Fib had passed along with so much trust and faith in the unseen Hand leading her safely to an unknown country. Whether her father thought of it or not, the same Hand was leading him.

He bought himself some bread at the first village shop he passed, and ate it by a running stream he knew of, for the way was familiar now, and grew more and more familiar still at every step. In the hop-gardens, as he went by, he noticed the pickers were here and there at work

already, and quickened his steps, fearing to be late in the field at the Thorntree Farm. It was very warm, the dust lay thick on the hedges, the sun struck down upon him fiercely, the burden and heat of the day had come again, the voices of the night were silent now.

He had forgotten the children. The necessity of earning money, the sight of the old toil he had not turned his hand to for so many years, or even so much as thought of, but which he had been accustomed to in earlier days, set him calculating how much he might hope to win by it now. Enough to start his barrow once again, and lead the old careless life. Enough to buy boots that were not "busted." Enough for many a merry hour at the Three Crowns.

How hot it was! But the farm was near at hand. Already the last village on the road was passed, and he could see

the sign (hanging motionless in the still air) of the lonely public-house at the corner where three ways met, just before the road dipped down so abruptly at the Thorntree Hill. How glad he was to see it, and to hasten his flagging steps, and press forward eagerly, remembering how he and Luke Sims had sat upon the bench outside, and drank success to each other, the day, years ago, when they had got so far upon their way—the day they had taken together that “wrong turning,” which Luke at least had regretted more than once since then.

No thought of Fib now. No little figure here, where he had never seen her warning him away. Upon the road before him, only a man, walking slowly, a man whom, as he gained upon his steps, he thought he knew; a man, even on that hot morning, wearing an old

coachman's cape, which looked odd, because it seemed to call for a horse and cart, or vehicle of some sort, to be in keeping with it, and the wearer was trudging along on foot.

Fib's father, alone though he was gave a low chuckling laugh.

"It's Lumber," he said to himself, "the rum old boy. Leastways, I'm most sure it is, and being Lumber I shall have company. *He* won't pass the public, Lumber won't, not if I know him."

He would not make himself known to his old acquaintance, but followed behind him quietly, with his unshod feet upon the dusty road, thinking to surprise him with the sudden meeting when they should both reach their goal together.

"Throwed out and badly hurt, and not trusted to drive no more, seemin'ly, and footing it in the old drivin' cape still. A queer one he always was. I'm glad I

met him. Over a glass, may-be, he'll find his tongue, so as I can learn what's doing at the farm, whether hands are wanted bad this season, or what sort of a job I'm like to get."

Thus thinking to himself, and every now and then laughing outright, to see how unconscious Lumber was of the near neighbourhood of any one at all, and quickening his steps, in order to gain upon him by degrees, and reach the public-house at the same time, Fib's father followed the other man as he walked on towards the sign hanging in the sunshine, on——and past it, never stopping for a moment, never so much as turning his head at all in that direction.

The man closely following him could scarcely believe his eyes.

"Why, 'tain't Lumber, after all ! Yes, 'tis. High ! Stop, I say, Lumber !"

Thus called upon, Lumber stood still, turned round, gave one look at his former acquaintance, nodded to him coolly, as though in the habit of seeing him every day, and went on again beside him—or would have gone on, but that Fib's father, with a detaining hand upon his arm, said, laughing,—

“What, no credit, eh? Come, I'll stand treat.”

Silent Lumber merely shook his head.

“You don't mean—you ain't never going to pass a public—*you*?”

“Signed.”

Where one word was enough, why use more? and this one word was quite enough to produce a great effect. Forgetting, in his astonishment, that he was walking away himself, Fib's father kept pace with the other man, who had stood still only for a moment.

“What—signed the pledge! A tem-

perance man now! *You* took the pledge?’ he exclaimed; “whatever was you thinking of? Lumber a temperance man!”

He could not get over it at all. He stared at the man beside him as though he had undergone some strange transformation, as though he doubted whether it were him, whether it could really be Lumber himself.

“Who come over you for to make you do such a thing as that?” he said at last.

“It were a little lass.”

“A lass! What, Lumber, you goin’ courtin’ after these many years! *You* courtin’!”

The idea seemed to amuse him very much. He walked on, laughing at his silent friend, clapped him on the shoulder, and laughed again, and bade him “go in and win.”

“Who is she? Give her a name. Who’s the girl as won’t take a man like you without he signs the pledge?”

“’Tain’t nothing of that kind.”

“What then?”

“Child.”

One word again serving his purpose, one word was all he used.

“Whose child?”

“Your’n.”

“Mine!”

“Ay; her as I druv down—Fib they call her.”

“Fib! Fib once more! Fib’s influence at work here too!”

Her father did not laugh now. He walked on silently for a few yards, wondering how this could be, and it was Lumber who spoke first.

“‘If you was took sudden, and you in drink—what then?’ Them was her words.”

"I never knowed as Fib were one to preach," her father said.

"She fretted."

"Fretted?"

"Ay : fell a-crying—*for me.*"

There was great wonder in his voice that any one should cry for him.

"And that were all she did, just took and cried?"

"That were all."

They went on yet another yard or two, then Lumber repeated once again,—

"'If you was took sudden, and you in drink—what then?' Them was her words. And she fell a-crying, the little lass did—*for me.*"

"And so you took and signed?"

"There wasn't no other way. If *you* can work it any other way, and take your pint and yet keep sober—a many do—why, you be free to work it so. I can't."

Was there any other way for him either? *was* he “free to work it so?” Or had the evil so far mastered him, that for him, as for “silent Lumber,” there was no other way to conquer, but this way?

By this time, owing to the sudden dip in the road, and the great steepness of the hill down which the two men were now walking, the public-house was already out of sight. Had not Fib stood even there, after all, watching at the corner, with her little patient face, with her small hand laid on his arm? Was not this her doing? Whether he thought of this or not,—and he never once looked back,—it was owing to her that he reached Thorntree Farm a sober man.

Turning up the narrow lane along which, led by the grey horse, the children had found their way by moonlight, and coming in sight of the farm building,

and, by-and-by, of the house itself, with its mistress standing in the deep porch, and watching him as he came towards her, there fell upon this man for the first time a sudden sense of shame, for this was not the coming back he had looked to when he left—if ever he had looked to coming back at all.

He hardly knew what to say when he stood, a ragged, shoeless tramp,—no whit better than those other hop-pickers he used to look down upon of old,—before the door; hardly knew how to begin, or how to ask for the work he had come to seek.

The mistress looked at him long and sharply, but though it was now many years since she had seen him, she seldom forgot any face that had once been familiar to her, and recognised his at once.

“He is not here; he never has been back—he’s at the old place still,” she

said in her quick way, and shaking her head as she spoke.

Taken aback that these should be her first words, Fib's father was silent, and stood looking even more shamefaced and downcast than before.

"I passed the children on. They got there safely. The old man was alive and well—at that time. He may be living still, and well still, for anything I know. You can rest here awhile. Have times gone hard with you?"

She glanced at his bare feet and ragged clothes.

"Very hard, off and on; harder than ever now. Can you give me work?" he said.

"Work? what work? what are you fit for—to have come to this?"

He said he asked only to go into the hop grounds with the other strangers whom she, like her neighbours, employed

at this busy season. That many came down from London, as he had done, with the same object—she must know that—many who were hard up, and penniless, and sought to earn money to start in life again. He had come here thinking that where hands were wanted, and in his time they always *had* been wanted for the hops, and where strangers found employment, the son of an old servant would not be refused.

“I don’t refuse you. I have not refused you yet.”

A busy woman always, and having much to see to, she left him then, and by-and-by he joined the other pickers, and after that came and went in the hop-gardens as they did themselves, and was in no way different from them, excepting that he spoke less, and worked harder than any there, for the picking had only just begun, and he thought he saw his

way to doing a good stroke of work, and returning to London with his pockets full.

But every day that passed over his head old associations revived, old memories woke.

On very clear bright days, from a rising ground behind the farm, there might be seen, scarcely definable except by those who knew what it was, and knew just where to look for it, the faint outline of the cathedral towers. Whenever he saw them he thought of Fib, and whenever he thought of Fib he caught himself repeating,—

“The old man was alive and well—*at that time.*”

Or of those words of Luke's that made him uncomfortable when he heard them,—

“Old folks don't live for ever.”

Making some remark to silent Lumber once of what he intended to do when he

was back once more in London, the man had looked surprised.

“You’re half way there,” he said.

“Half way to where? Words can’t be so scarce but you might name the place. Half way to London, do you mean? How do you make that out?”

Words seemed so very scarce just then that his companion made answer only by a sign, and waved his hand towards distant Calminster.

“Gammon!” said Fib’s father.

“You ain’t never going to turn back, and you half way?”

“Turn back! I tell you I ain’t set out that way at all,” the other cried impatiently.

The mistress, walking through the hop-garden, as was her habit now and then, and stopping for a moment to speak first to one, then to another as she passed, said to him once,—

“You’ll not go to them empty-handed; we shall pay off well this year. He must be getting past work by now.”

Why should every one take it for granted he was bound for Calminster and for nowhere else?

That evening he asked after one or two whom he remembered when he was a boy here in Killock Haugh. Where was Master Jepp, the mason?

“Dead.”

And Luke Sims’ uncle, who lived by the old forge? where *was* the forge? He noticed it was not standing in the same place now.

“Where should it be but pulled down, and the new one built higher up the hill? Jepp’s nephew was the blacksmith now. The uncle of Luke Sims died a year ago.”

“And the sexton? I ain’t seed him about.”

“He were an old man when you left—he’s dead.”

“But Gregson and the widow that kept the dame’s school, and John Fane—what’s come to them? *They* weren’t no older than my father; ’bout the same age or nearabouts.”

“All dead long since. Why, man, think how many years ’tis since you left the place, after the time you passed here, having cut and run from Calminster. How many years, and you look to see the old folks living still!” The man he spoke to laughed at him.

“Old folks do live long—uncommon long in these ’ere parts, they bein’ healthy, but when the time comes they take and fall sudden like dead leaves, they do. A good few of ’em at a time may-be,” said another neighbour.

“You do speak gospel truth. Mas’r Gregson, and John Fane, and Luke’s

uncle, them three all took and died at once, all in the same year. Hale and hearty old folks too they was, the three of 'em, up to the last," remarked a woman picking into the next bin.

"We can't none of us say when we shall be took, neither old *nor* young."

Every one shook their sage heads over the truism. They were stripping the hops from the bine as they talked, each with a jealous eye upon his neighbour's bin. However full one's own may be, it is merely human nature to feel a pang as the fragrant heap rises higher and higher in that of another.

Fib's father never ceased working, but while the hops fell fast from his fingers, or while he tore the bine from the pole, his thoughts were away at Calminster, or busy trying to recall the features of those old people who had "fallen like dead leaves," trying to persuade himself

they never could have looked so fresh and healthy as his father's face had looked the last time his eyes had rested on it, but that they must have been ailing old folk always.





VII.—AVICE.

WITH plenty to do, and no lack at all of occupation, or of interest in her life, the summer day followed each other pleasantly enough for Phœbe.

Morning after morning she woke to begin a round of usefulness, and each succeeding dawn that crept through her painted blind found her more content, more cheerful, more ready for her day's work, if that were possible, more happy than its predecessor. Her lot seemed cast in Calminster now for good and all. The days of poverty and care were as far off as those other days of peace and com-

fort in the home of her childhood. With all the preternatural wisdom of her three and twenty years, Phœbe, looking like a rose in the spring-time of her youth, only now verging upon summer, told herself that this was the burden and heat of the day, and that she liked it very much.

Tim used to declare that she honestly considered herself a middle-aged woman, and tried her best to act the part, but never could maintain her dignity for long together, and he wondered for his part what her pupils thought of her, or how they could submit to take lessons from her at all.

When she came singing down the stairs in early morning, and when she and her uncle and Tim all set off together after breakfast to their different places of business,—the grammar-school boy liking his own business least of all, and grumbling over *his* day's work, while Phœbe smiled

through hers,—Tim would ask sometimes, Did she laugh like that in the Close, or had she some orthodox, prim governess face and demeanour, to put on when she took off her hat and sat down to lessons?

“We *do* laugh,” Phœbe would answer; “and why not? It is as well to be ‘merry and wise,’ and one does not interfere with the other. I should be sorry to make such a burden of my day’s duties as you do of yours.”

The feeling of independence which was the result of work, seldom in itself distasteful, though not even Phœbe could find work play, or be always in the right mood for grammars and dictionaries, was quite delightful to the girl, who had been much amused at discovering the way she had risen in her uncle’s estimation since he became fully aware of her money value—the high salary she could command for her services. That was some-

thing Edmund Blunt could understand and appreciate; something you could put your hand on, for there it was, real and tangible, he was fond of saying. More real than those airy fabrics of worldly advantage which Mrs. Blunt was so fond of raising upon the foundations of Phœbe's "excellent connection," and which poor Phœbe so often overturned by her vexatious habit of not recognising the value of the said connection, but throwing over "genteel people" for the sake of those who could never help Tim or Avicé up a single step of that queer social ladder, upon the climbing of which their mother was so set.

It is perilously easy to swim with the stream! But for one or two influences in her life, to which Phœbe's better nature and true heart were quick to respond, who knows but her own standard might insensibly have been lowered, and

shadows have become real, realities only shadows, to the eyes that had seen so clearly once.

However, while her friends in Rose Street loved her as they did, and their wise old age, that yet had such a strange sweet youthfulness about it—reminding one of the lingering scent in the old jar of dried rose-leaves standing in their window—remained a guide to her young heart, and while she was conscious that Tim's observant eyes were on her always, half wondering she should live by a rule different from his own, half ready to believe that rule must be right and good, and while fond of calling her a "humbug," beginning to dread that she should turn out to be one after all, and, above all, while Avice needed her, and clung to her, and loved her better every day, Phœbe had influences in her life to keep her straight, and to banish the mere

business or the pleasure of it to their proper places.

She never allowed anything to interfere with the afternoons devoted to the little girl. However tired she might be when she reached home there was a merry word for Avice always. At night, when the little voice called softly, Phœbe heard at once, or was often standing watching by the bed when the restless sleeper opened her eyes, for in the hot, still nights Avice slept badly. Her mother, perhaps from being less constantly with her,—for when Phœbe was away the child spent the time chiefly in the open air with her nurse,—did not recognise as Phœbe did the change creeping on so slowly. Her father was more quick to notice it. Love has sharper eyes than pride, and *he* had always thought more of his little girl herself than of her frock, or her long curls, her snowy fair complexion, or those

large clear deep-set eyes, in themselves such a sign of delicacy.

“She never did stand heat well—no more did Tim at her age,” was all Mrs. Blunt said, when her husband called her attention to the white cheeks and hot dry hands; but she took Avice on her knee and kissed her, and was more than usually gentle to her, promising her a new dress for Miss Bartram’s wedding, for they had kindly bidden Phœbe bring the child with her on that great occasion,—indeed, Mrs. Blunt was to be present herself, and several amongst the townspeople.

“But *you* will be with Cousin Phœbe up near the altar, and are to go to the Grange afterwards, and you shall be as smart as the rest of them, my pet,” her mother said to Avice, drawing the long fair curls through her fingers, and pondering as to whether they would look better curled as usual or crimped.

"I don't care," the child said, wearily.

"Not care! why, you are to have new rose-coloured ribbons, and the frock shall be muslin over pink."

"Like the best spare-room toilet cover," said Tim, who lay on the sofa reading.

"It's hot; and I don't like lots of people," Avice answered, with a cool disregard of who the "lots of people" were that made her mother's hair stand on end.

"Phœbe will ruin the child with her own strange notions," said Mrs. Blunt, angrily.

"Notions seem to work well with Phœbe herself," observed Tim.

"They don't. They make her utterly careless of appearances."

"They make her ready to do anything for Avice by day or night—they make her content and jolly always; I should rather like to learn the secret." Tim

went on more from the spirit of opposition than anything else.

“What *would* you like?” asked Mrs. Blunt, beginning at last to be, as all the others had long been, willing that Avice should please herself and anxious to find out her wishes.

“I’d like Phœbe to come home and never go out again, and I’d like grapes,” said Avice; “and why don’t we live in Grove Street? It’s hot here.” She slipped down from her mother’s knee as she spoke, and went out into the hall to watch for Phœbe. Her father found her there later. The little figure seemed to grow more slender every day. It gave him a pang to see her, and to hear the words she was softly singing to herself—only the verse of a hymn Phœbe had taught her,—

“I want to be an angel,
And with the angels stand.”

And just then Tim, coming up suddenly behind her, pulled one of her long curls, and Avice turned round, not angelic yet by any means, for she slapped Tim's face heartily, and exclaimed that "boys were horrid, and he was the horriest boy of all."

Anger had brought a flush to her cheek also. Mr. Blunt carried her into the parlour, and sharply bade Tim mind what he was about; and they were all looking heated and worried when Phœbe came home, and restored peace at once.

"Talk," Avice said, when she was established in her cousin's lap, the fair head leaning against Phœbe's black dress, "talk, like we do upstairs."

Phœbe, reading in the looks of her uncle and her aunt that she need not hesitate to comply with any request of Avice's henceforth, did as she was asked without delay. The low murmuring talk

went on uninterruptedly, question and answer succeeding each other between the two speakers.

“Never tired there,” said Avice.

“Never, darling, nor ill, nor naughty any more.”

“I like the green pastures best—the sapphires and the golden streets make my head ache. Is it cool and pretty in the green pastures?”

“So cool and pretty, dear, and the Good Shepherd will lead Avice there. He carries the lambs in His bosom,—the little, weak, feeble lambs like Avice.”

“That’s children?”

“Yes, the children who are to come to Him.”

“Far off?” The child’s eyes were half-closed now.

“Oh, no, darling! Close at hand; here always.”

“Sing,” Avice said presently.

Before the notes of the simple hymn died away, the child was asleep.

“Do you think such talk is good for her? I consider she should be kept cheerful,” Mrs. Blunt said, in a hushed voice.

“What better way to be cheerful than to cast all our care upon One who careth for us?” Phœbe’s voice shook, she was speaking to the secret care awake now in the hearts of both parents, not of Avice herself exactly.

Mr. Blunt rose hastily, and walking to the window, stood there looking out. His wife joined him by-and-by, but they exchanged no words, only held each other by the hand. They were nearer in that moment than they ever had been since the days before their marriage. Mr. Blunt was not thinking of his ledgers, his account at the bank, of what his wife called “grubbing” at all; neither was

she thinking of appearances. The little fragile link that had drawn them momentarily so near together was a link with higher things.

Tim knelt down by his sister and looked at her silently. She opened the heavy eyes very soon again, and seeing him kneeling there, put out one little hot hand, and gently stroked the cheek she had slapped.

"Kiss me, Tim: we must be good," she said.

Tim kissed her, and went out of the room. Phœbe looked after him with a smile.

Were they better or worse, all of them, for this coming shadow? Happier, or more unhappy? Her heart supplied the answer.

But Avice was not always so languid or uneasy as to-day. There were days, many of them, when she was almost her

old self, only a better, gentler, and more child-like self than she had been of old. At such times they would forget their fears, and all would seem as usual, till some new change in her recalled them. They had always spoiled her more or less: her mother from pride in her beauty; her father from the weakness of affection; Tim, from a natural goodness of heart and love of anything weaker or smaller than himself, which was one of the boy's characteristics. Now they vied with one another to spoil her more than ever. It was only Phœbe who ever said, "Avice, you are naughty," or who checked her selfishness and tried to lead her right.

"I wonder you've the heart to scold her, Phœbe," Mrs. Blunt said quite indignantly one day when she had found Avice in tears, over some deserved reproof.

"Suffer the little children to come

unto me, and *forbid them not.*' Don't you think one way of keeping them from Him is to let them be naughty if we can help it?" Phœbe said rather sadly.

"You have such odd notions, Phœbe!" Mrs. Blunt would have been greatly surprised to be told she was echoing not only the thoughts but the very expressions of a poor ignorant woman in a London alley! But, whatever their station, and however much surprised some of them might be at the idea of having *anything* in common, it is true that there *is* a common standpoint for those who separate life and religion, as for those to whom religion and life are one.

Every day it grew to be the family fashion to ask Avice what she would like. Now it was to go to the shop with her father and spend the day there; now to be taken to visit the Miss Freers; once or twice to go and see Gideon; often she

went to the Grange with Phoebe and her pupils; oftener still, out in the woods with Tim, who bestowed all his leisure time upon her. No one refused her anything, so that when one day she said to her father, "I'd like you to stay at home," no one was surprised that Mr. Blunt stayed.

"What is to become of business at this rate?" he said, as he sat in the shade out of doors with Avice on his knee.

"Phoebe says it's 'careful bread,'" the child answered.

"What?"

There was a frown on the stationer's brow, but he soon remembered that the remark might have been a very innocent one, and that Avice had not lost a habit of misquotation, for which she was as famous as for delivering herself of inconvenient truths.

"So he giveth his beloved sleep," she said next, evidently dwelling upon the words.

"You would get no bread of any sort if poor father did not earn it, and no bed to sleep in, and no pretty frocks to wear," he said, holding up a bunch of grapes to show their lovely purple bloom.

"Haven't we enough?" asked Avice.

She was very happy with him that day, and other days as well, for the request once having been acceded to was repeated often.

His children never could have believed how many stories the stationer could tell, or how well he told them—better than Sir John, Avice declared, which was a great compliment, for Sir John's stories were the chief charm of the Grange visits to her. He knew how to make mats too of the long fine grass, and knew so many funny songs and games. He was sur-

prised at himself, quite proud and pleased to find how many talents he possessed and how amusing he could be, so that even Tim began to lose his awe of him, and to believe he might actually know from experience what "a fellow's" trials and temptations, joys and griefs were. Tim found it very possible to believe now what really he had almost doubted before, that his father had once been young himself. The child, in her unconscious weakness, was drawing these two also more closely together than they ever had been drawn in their lives before. But one afternoon, when Avice was more tired and weary even than usual, she asked her father for something he could not do for her.

Stories, games, funny songs, jokes with Tim, beautiful grapes, the antics of her own pet kitten, all alike seemed wearisome. Not cross,—she very seldom was

cross now,—but touchingly patient and gentle, Avice, leaning back in her father's arms, looked up at him and said,—

“I know what would rest me.”

“What is it, my darling?” he stooped his lips to the little forehead.

“Talk, like Phœbe talks,” and Avice settled herself more comfortably to listen.

There was a complete silence. Tim looked at his father curiously.

“Tell about the Good Shepherd,” Avice said, still waiting for the story she loved best, and with as yet no doubt that she was to hear it told.

“About Jesus,” she repeated, once more, wondering at the continued silence.

“God forgive me, child; I cannot talk to you as Phœbe talks,” Mr. Blunt said then, and kissing her once more, he put her gently down and went away.

“Is father angry, Tim?” asked Avice, wondering.

“ Oh, no : he don’t just happen to remember what you want to hear.”

“ You tell it, then,” said the child.

“ Tell what ? ”

“ Oh, let me see—about the prodigy son,” with a mispronunciation that made Tim laugh, “ or any of those stories Jesus told. I like them,” said Avicæ.

So Tim told them. Shyly, reverently, and with an unusual flush upon his cheek, and a softening of his roguish boyish glances.

“ You don’t talk like Phœbe, but you tell it right,” Avicæ was graciously pleased to observe.

“ Why do you like those stories best ? ” Tim asked, with some curiosity to hear the answer.

“ They’re real, you know,” said Avicæ.

Yes, Tim, real ; nothing tangible, nothing you can lay your hand upon, and

touch, and say, There it is ; but for all that, real.

“ Why don't you talk afterwards as Phœbe does ? don't you know how ? ” persisted the child.

“ No,” Tim said, very gently, “ I don't know how.”

“ Mr. Lister knows how, and so do Miss May and Miss Joy. I wish Mr. Lister would come back soon ; ” and Avice, at the thought of her friend, crept to the piano and played her scales, with such weak trembling little fingers, and a very uncertain touch. “ He told me to do it for his sake ; so I must, you know,” she said, when Tim remarked that she would tire herself, and tried to tempt her from the instrument.

Every one they knew was kind to the little girl, and all the friends of Phœbe were Avice's friends too. The Miss Freers not only made her welcome in

Rose Street,—where she was free to pull about all their treasures, and never once told not to touch, as used to be the case before,—but found their way to Meadowthorn House to visit her. Mrs. Dawes used to call in her carriage, and carry off Avice and Phœbe to spend a long day at the Oaks.

“Don’t blind yourself, my dear,” kind Mrs. Dawes said to Phœbe one afternoon as they were watching Avice, to whom both the Jackdaw and Tim were making themselves agreeable just then—“don’t blind yourself. It may be a mercy that the truth is hidden from the eyes of the poor parents, but it is as well that some one should see clearly.”

“I do not think the truth is hidden from any of us now,” Phœbe said, ready tears springing to her eyes, for she loved Avice dearly.

“It is very sad. I always longed for

a dear little daughter myself. Jack is a good boy, but a daughter—" Mrs. Dawes looked at Phœbe wistfully. "My dear, when you are tired of your governing, you must come to me," she said; I need a companion, and if I am able to pay one, why should I not have a companion as well as the greatest lady of them all?"

"Why, indeed?" said Phœbe, smiling.

"Then come to me. I would give a salary that would be worth all your other engagements put together. And you know it should be like a home to you. I do not give myself airs, Phœbe, and you would still be near your uncle and aunt and your cousins. Think of it now, my dear."

"I do think of it, I think a great deal of it, for it is so kind of you; but you know it is only that you may spoil me and be good to me; you know

you do not want a companion, dear Mrs. Dawes."

"I do want one. I hope you will allow me to know what I want for myself."

"Well, then, as I cannot come, indeed I cannot just at present, let us look through the advertisements and find someone else. There are always plenty to be had."

Phœbe took up the *Times* and read out one after another of the advertisements from its columns. Mrs. Dawes found objections to them all. Phœbe laughed at her.

"There, you see! you don't want a companion, Mrs. Dawes. You would not know what to do with one if you had one."

"I want you," Mrs. Dawes said; "I should know what to do with you very well."

And then Phœbe kissed her.

“People are so kind to me,” the girl said; “I seem to have so many friends, I never can be grateful enough to them, or love them enough.”

“Is Mr. Lister a friend?”

Avice had found her way to her cousin's side again, and put the inconvenient question very earnestly.

“I wish he would come back. When will he come, Phœbe? we have waited patiently, haven't we—you and I?”

Mrs. Dawes had pity upon Phœbe's glowing cheeks, and answered for her that Mr. Lister would be here soon now, for it wanted a few weeks only of the time fixed for Miss Bartram's wedding.

But before that time came, to which Mrs. Blunt was looking forward so eagerly, and for which the muslin frock and her own violet silk were in prepara-

tion, Avice became seriously ill. It was doubtful whether the frock would be wanted, or whether she would be able to be present at the festivities, though the doctors felt sure of her recovery from this attack. Assured of their opinion, and satisfied that the child was not in actual danger, her mother found leisure to be excessively cross at this ill-timed sickness. If she had at least put it off till after the wedding !

“ Nothing goes right with me ! I’m sure the trials I’ve had have been enough to wear one’s life out. It’s all very well for young people to be content, though I do feel it heartless, I must say, of Phœbe to be smiling like that,” said the prosperous mistress of Meadowthorn House, who, till Avice’s illness, had scarcely known what trial meant.

Phœbe had been up all night with her little cousin. She was standing now in

the sunshine talking to the two old ladies, who, early as it was, had walked from Rose Street to inquire after their favourite. As she turned away to go back into the house, the Grange dog-cart, bringing Frank Lister from the station, drove past. He took off his hat; Phœbe waved her hand; then recollected herself, checked the friendly gesture, and bowed her head in a dignified manner: she had been a little taken by surprise, for she had not known the exact day on which he was expected.

“How sweet she is!” Miss May said, as the old sisters, smiling too, went on their way.

“I hope she will be happy,” said Miss Joy, a little seriously.

“She is sure to be that, whether or no.”

The oracular sentence appeared to be fully understood, for Miss Joy nodded

her head and echoed her sister's words,—

“Yes, sure to be happy.”

Meantime Phoebe was submitting to a scolding for her heartlessness, and not resenting it at all, only very sorry for her aunt, and doing her best to soothe her ruffled temper.





VIII.—THE LITTLE STRAW HAT.

IT was not only Mrs. Dawes who had taken the fancy to have Phœbe for a companion.

One morning Sir John Bartram rode early into Calminster. As Phœbe left the canon's house in the Close, the baronet was walking up and down in the shade, deep in conversation with his brother.

"That is a ladylike girl—Blunt's niece, you know," Sir John had begun.

"Very much so. I assure you we esteem ourselves fortunate to secure her."

"But Cecy—Cecy must be fifteen or more now."

"Sixteen," put in Mr. Bartram.

"Well, and is she up to her? I should hardly have thought she would be—up to Cecy, I mean," said Sir John, who spoke in jerks, and was a little given to reiteration.

"She is very well up to her indeed; must have had quite a superior education. Knows her own value too. What do you suppose we give her now?"

Mr. Bartram named the sum Phœbe received as her salary.

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Sir John, who so far agreed with the stationer that his opinion of Phœbe was rather exalted by hearing how much she was worth; "why, you might get a first-class governess for that."

"She *is* a first-class governess," said the canon.

"Then I suppose I must not interfere?"

“ Oh, pray, don't interfere. The girls are fond of her, and it has been such a relief to their mother.”

“ Ah, well. But you see my lady—my lady likes her.”

“ We all like her.”

“ And Cecilia now—when Cecilia has left us, my lady ought to have a companion, and she does not fancy a stranger. Her music too,—Miss Blunt's music, you know,—it would be an advantage to her.”

“ But not to us,” said his brother; “ when members of a family live in the same neighbourhood, I think they ought not to interfere with one another, John.”

“ No, to be sure, they ought not. You are right enough. But my lady—I'm sorry about my lady. I fancied—at least, Cecilia fancied—we might make some arrangement. She only comes to you in the mornings, does she ? ”

“Only in the mornings; but let her speak for herself,” for Phœbe came from the garden gate just then, and was passing the two gentlemen rather hastily.

“Miss Blunt,” said the canon, “Sir John wishes to tempt you away from us.”

“To live with my lady,” said Sir John.

“I don’t think Cecy and Grace can spare you,” said the canon.

“But my lady wants you the most,” interrupted the baronet, and they both laughed at the pretty perplexed look she gave them, and Mr. Bartram said it was not fair to her to state the case so suddenly. They must all have time for consideration, he said, and Cecilia was not married yet.

So Phœbe went on her way blushing and laughing, amused, and a little glad to find how greatly in request she was, and feeling happier and more lighthearted

than she had done for some days. Avice was so much better, and would be able to go to the wedding, after all. Frank had been to see the child; he and Phœbe had discussed together the musical programme for the evening of the wedding day. Calminster was a pleasant place, Phœbe told herself, as she walked on quietly, keeping to the shady side of the street, and only giving her uncle a friendly nod as she passed, and saw him look up for a moment from his desk, almost as though he *felt* rather than saw that she was near. She was anxious to get back to Avice—and who knew whether Frank might not have called already for the music Phœbe had stitched so neatly together for him yesterday? If she were really to live at the Grange, he would be always coming and going, and Lady Bartram was so good, Phœbe felt she could be very happy with her.

But she would not decide hastily. Indeed, she would not decide at all, but leave it to the Bartrams themselves, who had been so good to her, both the canon's family and Sir John. She would leave it to them entirely, and laughed to herself to think that she had become a piece of property of theirs to dispose of as they would. Whichever way it was settled, she felt sure she should feel content. "Oh, yes," thought Phœbe, "the world is a pleasant place, and every one is very good to me. My darling father was right to send me here, and this is just the life he meant me to lead." Walking with a light step, her sweet face brighter than ever for the dawning of a new joy in her life,—a joy she had not ventured to name even to herself, hardly dared look at even in her thoughts, rather, indeed, looked *away* from shyly,—Phœbe repeated to herself, "Work to do, friends to love,

why, even aunt is satisfied now; and if she *can* be pleased, so much the better, surely. Yes, this is the life my father wished for me."

And, at that moment, at the corner of Grove Street, leading into High Street, the airy fabric fell, the slide in the magic lantern was changed; one shadow was flitting, another falling in its place; for though she did not know it, another change in Phœbe's fortunes was at hand.

Was she ready to meet it? As ready as to meet those other changes she had known? As careless,—or, rather, as trustful,—knowing how little mattered any changes here?

What was it met her at the corner of the street? Only a little messenger,—one it was no wonder Phœbe did not recognise as being sent by fate or fortune, as men say, by God's good Providence, as some believe. Who does recognise, at

first sight, the bearers of such messages as these? It is only, looking back and noting whither they have led us, that we know them at last for messengers of the Great King.

And this was only Fib. A weeping, miserable-looking Fib, quite limp from crying, and so unlike her usual cheerful self that Phœbe scarcely knew her. She stopped at once.

“Why, Fib! my little Fib, what *is* the matter? what dreadful trouble are you in to-day?”

“He said you’d be in Grove Street, and I was to run, and will you please come quick along of me? she’s took that bad as we don’t know what to do, and grandfather can’t get about hisself, and said, says he, ‘You fetch her, Fib.’”

“Fetch me?”

The child had turned, and was walking rapidly in the direction of the Minster

Lane, seeming to have no doubt at all, but to be quite sure, that her friend would follow. Fib shuffled on so fast, Phœbe had much ado to keep up with her.

“What is it?” she said; “why does he want me? Have you had a doctor, Fib? what is it I can do?”

“Tell her I said as how she was to come, for there ain’t no one else left to look to,” Fib repeated, crying still, still pressing on, jostling people as she went, not heeding it, or their rough words in consequence, and looking back only to make sure that Phœbe followed.

“I wish you would stand still for a moment, little Fib. Just tell me *who* is ill, and what it is,” Phœbe implored.

And then Fib did stand still, and burst out crying louder than ever, and wrung her hands, but only said,—

“She loves him, and kisses of him so

much! Oh, Don! Dead in three days he was, and I seed him at school the day before—it's that quick, and he getting that strong and rosy as I thought father wouldn't know him when he come."

"Don! Don dead in three days!"

Phœbe, quite horror-struck, stood in amazement staring at the child, who to her still more complete bewilderment cried out that it was not Don, but little David,—that Don was quite well, and begged her to come quickly, and finally set off running at full speed, leaving Phœbe to follow at her own pace.

That there was some dreadful trouble was only too plain, but what it was Phœbe was fairly puzzled to make out. She rejoiced that she had been delayed those few minutes in the Close, for otherwise, owing to her not having lingered that day in Grove Street, Fib and she would have missed each other,

and the child in her sore distress would have had further still to run. Phœbe forgot all about Frank Lister and his music in her sympathising grief and wonder. It was of no use to try and guess what was the matter, or why Fib should weep because little David—whoever he might be—was dead, or to try to gather a meaning from the child's incoherent words. The only thing was to go to the Minster Lane as quickly as she could, ready to give all the help that might be in her power.

It was not very far now, and once past the High Street, and in the quieter and more secluded thoroughfares, Phœbe quickened her pace until it became almost a run, and when she reached the lane and stopped at the familiar gate was breathless, and obliged to stand there for a moment to rest before going up to the cottage.

All looked very much as usual. It was a relief to see Don at play before the door, and to hear him cry out cheerily that "the lady was come," and to notice that he looked quite well and strong as he ran down the path towards her. Evidently, whatever the trouble was, it had not affected little Don as yet. What could it possibly be, to account for its effect upon his sister?

Gideon Fagge, seated in the old Windsor chair, just within the door, was looking out for her, and yet as she drew near made her a sign to keep away from him.

"Don't come no nearer than the porch," he said; "there ain't no occasion to tempt Providence, leastways I'd have you to judge for yourself when you hear what the trouble is."

"What is it?" asked Phœbe, panting, and glad to sit on the low bench within

the porch; "Fib has quite frightened me. Is it Deborah who is ill? The child seemed half beside herself."

"She is that. Poor little lass, she didn't ought to trouble over it as she do, but by reason of her fear for Don she takes it very hard just at the first. Your aunt——" he hesitated and looked at Phœbe in a strange sort of perplexity, she fancied, and yet as though he were very glad to see her, more glad than he had ever been before.

"My aunt does not know. I was in Grove Street, on the way home, when Fib met me. My aunt would not object—I mean she ought not. Is it anything infectious?" she asked.

"They say so. There's some long name for it that I can't not rightly turn my tongue to. Seems just as easy to call it what it is, and that's sore throat."

“Diphtheria?”

“Ay, that be the word.”

Phœbe looked grave. Her thought flew to Avice, to her pupils—she did not see the end of this.

“Fib, she got terribly scared along of little David Edwards dying of it in three days, and along of hearing it was that catching if you come too nigh a person having it, or kiss ’em, or anything of that sort; but my opinion is, that there ain’t no fear for Don, and things can be settled for him not to go nigh his aunt.”

“What does the doctor say?”

“The doctor says port wine, and he says strong beef-tea constant, and they don’t neither of ’em grow on gooseberry bushes in my garden, they don’t,” Gideon answered, with one of his old smiles, seeming half amused, half pleased, and wholly happy, Phœbe thought, to see her there.

“You want money then,” she said, producing her little purse and turning all its contents into her lap to see how much was there.

“There’s nourishment, and wine too for to-day, but to-morrow treads pretty quick upon its heels, and at no time quicker than when rent is due, and sickness within the door. I ain’t the man I was, being doubled up with rheumatics: my hands even is crippled for a bit, or I could have been equal to it still, and wouldn’t have asked no one’s help.”

“But you do ask mine, and I am so glad to give it, and see how rich I am! Where’s Fib? can I send her now at once for all that is needed? Who nurses Deborah? How much will the rent be? Tell me, is there enough here; I’ve more at home.” Phœbe was quite glad and eager.

“My uncle——” she began again.

Gideon raised his hand.

“Stop,” he said; “don’t ask nothing of Mr. Edmund, not for me nor mine. It’s right you should help, or I’d not let you do it.”

“Of course it is right.”

Phœbe wondered a little; why more right for her than for her uncle?

“Ay, but you don’t know *how* right, and it do appear to me the time’s come to tell you. I’ve seen enough of you to be sure as *you* won’t take it wrong, no more than Mr. Har’ld did hisself,—to know as you ain’t one to think too highly of them things at all; and yet—I wouldn’t trouble you only for one thing.”

“I don’t understand.”

Phœbe got up and came nearer to the old man, quite puzzled now, wholly at a loss to discern a meaning in his words at all; and he, though she stood beside

his chair, seemed to have forgotten the fancied necessity for making her remain at a distance from him, and only gazed up into the young face above him.

“It’s been a pleasure to see you some one time, a pleasure to know you was near, a great pleasure for to be sure as she would have been the same herself, and not spoiled or altered from her own old pretty self, the greatest pleasure of all to know as he she went away with brought up her child right, for all the good Fib knows you’ve teach’d her; and if we’ve been far apart, you and me, and you a lady, yet we’ve travelled the same road still—the road to Heaven; and if so be we are on that ’ere road, what do it matter how it seem to twist and turn, and lead past curious places here below?”

Far from understanding still, still wondering and perplexed, half fancying

the old man must be wandering in his mind, Phœbe could only repeat again, with faltering voice, what she had said before,—

“I don’t understand.”

The little straw hat had fallen from its place behind the door. Gideon reached out his stick, and, awkwardly, owing to his hands lamed with rheumatism, tried to draw it to him; seeing which Phœbe raised it from the floor, and gave it him. Surely, she thought, he *must* be wandering, for, apparently forgetful of all else, he blew the dust off the little hat, and smoothed the faded ribbon, and looked at it with a smile.

“It’s hung there a number of years now, but it do seem to me as if she’d only laid it off her head to-day,” he murmured.

“It was your daughter’s,” Phœbe said gently.

He held it out to her—the old hand shook, and the voice in which he answered was broken,—

“This ’ere little hat—it were your mother’s, Phœbe.”

In the silence that followed, the room seemed turning round with Phœbe.

“She were only seventeen, and Mr. Har’ld he come about the place, and was here often; he and me, we agreed well, we did, I never saw no harm in his coming in and out. That ere lilac by the door, your father set it hisself—it’s growed beautiful. And my lass, she’s dead so many years,” Gideon said presently.

No answer from Phœbe; her eyes wandered to the lilac tree, then fell upon the faded ribbon on the hat, then turned to his face again, with the same wondering look.

“Mr. Edmund he come one day and

scolded, and Deborah took offence—poor Deborah always fired up easy, she'd brought the girl up too, and loved her, and was that proud of her as she could think nothing too good. Natural like, Mr. Edmund didn't see it so. He wished for his brother to marry amongst the town families, same as the Blunts always have done, and I—she were that young, I never considered her thoughts was so much as turned that way, and when Mr. Edmund spoke up rough, I took and sent her and Deborah away back to the parts we come from,—we ain't Calminster folk born, you know, but come from Killock Haugh,—so I took and sent 'em to the Thorntree Farm, and the missus she looked after 'em."

Silence still—no words from Phoebe yet, only a glow upon her cheek, a growing light in her eyes, thoughts chasing each other through her mind, a smile

dawning about the soft lines of her mouth as memory began to supply the key to this strange history. After a moment's pause Gideon spoke again.

“ We'd had her teached a goodish bit, and she was always quick to learn. She didn't use to talk rough as we do ourselves, but most like a lady, same as you do, and she were a good girl, and a lovin' girl, and never give us a sore heart but once. Deborah was proud of her—too proud—so when she come in one day and said he'd followed 'em to Killock Haugh and they was married, she was that pleased as she forgot to cry along of losing her. She wrote very lovin' after that, and Mr. Har'ld he wrote just like hisself, and spoke of bringing of her down to see me constant, and then——”

The old man's voice failed him, his eyes turned to the lilac at the door, that had blossomed anew for so many succeeding

summers, while Phœbe's mother had lain dead.

"He'd took her from me, you see," Gideon went on by-and-by, "and he couldn't give her back."

"The last words he spoke were, 'I send him *my* Phœbe in exchange.' Oh, grandfather, never to have told me this before!"

Phœbe was kneeling by his chair, her soft hands stroked the poor knotted twisted ones, hardened by toil and cramped now by pain, her soft cheek was laid against them. Half laughing, half crying, she repeated over and over again,—

"Never to have told me this before! Grandfather, how could you? To let me come and go, and be a lady, as you call it, all this while, and never to have told me till to-day!"

"I knew as you would take it so—I

knew as you were one to take it so," Gideon answered, the shrewd, quiet, patient face lit up with smiles; "many a time I've had it in my mind to point out to Mr. Edmund as he had no cause to trouble, for what difference does it make to us, to you and me, except in lovin' one another? You'll go your way same as before."

"My way will lead me here," said Phœbe, feeling, as was but natural, a little angry and indignant, and as though some unworthy trick had been played upon her by her relations at Meadowthorn House; "it was my uncle, then, who would not let you tell me?"

"From the first it was his wish to keep it quiet. He had a notion it would make his equals look down on him,—some folks do trouble themselves above a bit about the outside look of things, and I ain't saying suitable marriages isn't more pur-

pose-like than unsuitable ones,—and kept quiet it was according to his wish. He was set upon my leaving the place altogether, and bestirred himself to get me a good post, as gardener, far away; but there was reasons why I couldn't, and can't now, see my way to leave."

"Why should you leave!" cried Phœbe, hotly. "Oh, we will be so happy now, and I earn enough for us all, and you shall have no more trouble, and we will hire a labourer for the garden till you get about again; and Deborah—*Aunt* Deborah—shall have wine and tea and the best of all that money can get for her. And *what* a woman we will make of little Fib!" And with that she rose from her knees, pressed the faded ribbon of her dead mother's hat to her rosy lips, and hung it up once more upon its peg, and stepped back to look at it, and asked, Did her mother looked pretty when

she wore it? and had she had it on when her father had come and gone about the place as Gideon spoke of? and began to prattle like a child, and then suddenly burst into tears, crying that if her father had lived this secret would have been known to her long ago, for he would have brought her here, and yet—why had he never done so?”

“Hush,” said Gideon, gravely; “there ain’t nothing to put yourself in such a work about. Truth’s best most times, leastways I’ve found it don’t never work right to hide it; so, though not wanting to say a ill word of no one, I be bound to say this much—I do be nigh upon certain as Mr. Har’ld considered I was dead or left these parts a many years ago.”

“My uncle told him so, you mean!”

“Or he didn’t tell him no otherwise—that’s about all I do mean,” said Gideon.

“You might have needed us——”

“I need you *now*, and you be here,” he answered, smiling; “and yet—not wishing to stand in no one’s light, I don’t know as I would have told you but for one thing, and that is Deborah. She’s had a hard life, partly by taking things hard and not being peaceful in her mind, and she’s been a good sister to me. I don’t see no good in fashioning crosses for ourselves—it’s *them* as is too heavy for us mostly, not the crosses as is laid on us—and you bein’ here, and she that reared your mother bein’ sick unto death, and fretting grievous for to see you, or leastwise for to have a word from you, and you should know she was your aunt, it was borne in upon me as it were right to speak, whether Mr. Edmund was pleased or no—and I were glad to think it right, for my old heart has yearned over Phœbe’s lass this many a day.”

Impulsive always, forgetting all about

her pupils, forgetting Avice even, and all danger of infection, Phœbe's hand was on the door before her grandfather ceased speaking.

“Reared my mother, and sick now, and fretting to see me! Oh, poor aunt Deborah! let me go up at once. Who should be with her now but me?”

But Gideon, with one more remonstrance against putting herself “in a work,” and with a word of counsel to her to think quietly of the risk she ran, before taking the decisive step of entering the sick chamber, persuaded her to remain where she was till Fib came home from the errands on which she had been despatched immediately upon her first return to the cottage.

When Fib did come, she was no longer in such an agony of grief and apprehension, but quiet enough to listen to Phœbe's hopeful auguries for the future, and to

share Phœbe's firm belief that Don, being perfectly well now, if only they kept him carefully away from Deborah's room, ran very little or no risk at all. To soothe and comfort Fib, to reason with her, to remind her of how safely—they having done their part—Don might be left to the Fatherly care that had never failed him in all his childhood yet, was Phœbe's first task for her newly found relations, and in fulfilling it she grew calm and quiet herself.

She decided finally to walk to Meadowthorn House at once, and explain her long delay, and to turn over in her mind whether it were best to hire a good nurse for Deborah, or what steps to take for the comfort and well-being of the little household in the Minster Lane, which she then and there accepted as her charge.

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